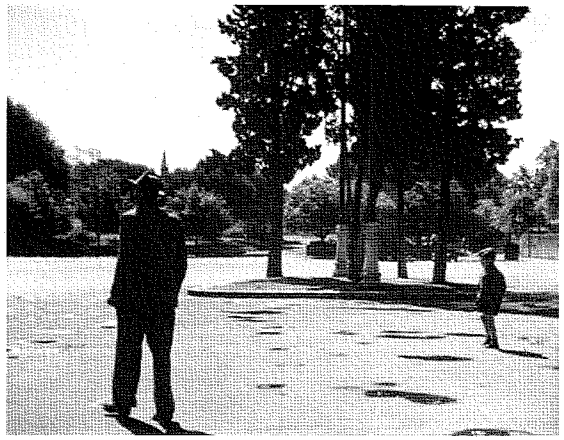
VISIT…

Bicycle Thieves

[Ladri di biciclette]

Robert S. C. Gordon



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Author's Note

Ladri di biciclette was released in the UK with the title *Bicycle Thieves* (a literal translation) and in the US as *The Bicycle Thief*. The UK title is preferred here, unless American material is being quoted directly. On occasion, I have referred to approximate film timings: as these vary between formats and editions, so that the length of *Bicycle Thieves* spans from eighty-four minutes in some DVD versions to ninety-three minutes in cinema prints, for its 2561 metres of film, I should note that my timings refer to the DVD version issued by Arrow Films, 2006. I have translated all dialogue quotations from the original Italian myself, as subtitled versions are often incorrect or incomplete. Cross-references in the main text (see p. 50; or, p. 50) refer to images found on those pages.

Introduction

On 20 April 1948, Cesare Zavattini put the finishing touches to a screenplay he had been working on – together with director and regular collaborator Vittorio De Sica and a group of others – for the previous nine months. The film was shot, mostly out in the streets of Rome, over the following three months and edited in the autumn. It was first shown on 21 November 1948, with director, writers and actors all in attendance, at the Sunday film club (*circolo del cinema*) held in the Cinema Barberini, at the lower end of Via Veneto in central Rome. Its title, together with a sprinkling of plot elements and locations, had been borrowed from a little-known novel of 1946 by a mercurial artist and writer called Luigi Bartolini. The novel was called *Ladri di biciclette* (*Bicycle Thieves*).

Bicycle Thieves is one of the most beguiling, moving and (apparently) simple pieces of narrative cinema ever made. It tells the story of Antonio Ricci (Lamberto Maggiorani), forced to search the streets of Rome for his stolen bicycle, the bicycle which had looked set to free him at last from long-term unemployment. The search proves futile and, at the end, Antonio and his son Bruno (Enzo Staiola) are left to walk towards home and an uncertain future without the talismanic bicycle. Beneath this inconclusive, meandering tale the makers of *Bicycle Thieves* managed to settle layer upon layer of complexity, in one of the greatest sleights of hand in cinema history: complexities of style, narrative and form, of politics and sociology, of urban geography (or, better, psycho-geography) and history, including a surreptitious dose of film history. The film spins and weaves around its thin central strand a textured tapestry of a world, a moment in time, a vision of Rome and of Italy in 1948, as well as a project for what cinema could and should be at that time. It contains multitudes – not for nothing is its most obsessive motif that of the crowd.

Bicycle Thieves went on general release in Rome and several other Italian cities from 22 December 1948. It took 252 million lire at the box office for the 1948–9 season, ranking eighth for Italian films, but its success was uneven;[1] a grim story of urban poverty hardly constituted an ideal Christmas release. Some, including members of the new Christian Democrat government, would complain about the gloomy image of Italy presented to the world by this and other films like it. Nevertheless, something of the film's power was evident to most of its first viewers and its canonisation as a 'great' film began swiftly and spread well beyond Italy. Within weeks, it was being fêted in Paris by the cream of the French intelligentsia (René Clair, Jean Cocteau, André Gide) following a packed première at the Salle Pleyel in February 1949 (several accounts have Clair spontaneously embracing De Sica at the end). France would also be the springboard for the film's international reception in the field of film analysis, as it was taken up, starting with a 1949 essay, by the most influential and sophisticated cinema critic of the day and champion of new Italian cinema, André Bazin.[2]

The film's reputation now preceded it. When it was shown in London in December 1949, the reviewer in *The Times* began: '*Bicycle Thieves* has not stolen upon the country unawares. For a long time those whose business is with the cinema have been agitated by rumours of an Italian film which would rival the masterpieces of the old silent days.'[3] In the US, Bosley Crowther in the *New York Times* heralded it as an 'absolute triumph'[4] and it was awarded a 'special foreign-language film' Oscar in 1949 (De Sica's previous film, *Sciuscià* (*Shoeshine*, 1946), had won a special Oscar in 1947, the first ever separate award for a foreign film). A slew of other prizes came from Italy, Belgium, Switzerland and the UK. Paradoxically perhaps, another mark of the success of this modest foreign film was the trouble it had with – and the trouble it ultimately caused to – the American Production Code and its chief enforcer Joe Breen, whose failed attempts to enforce two cuts on the US version (a shot of Bruno peeing in the street and a scene set in a

brothel) marked, according to one account, 'the beginning of the end of the Production Code'.[5]

Despite this local difficulty, by 1952, *Bicycle Thieves* was voted to the top spot in the first *Sight and Sound* poll of the greatest films of all time and it has continued to astonish and inspire film-makers across the world, providing a deep seam for anyone interested in the labyrinthine experience of the modern city, the travails of poverty in the modern world, the fraught bonding of fathers and sons, and the capacity of the camera to capture something like the reality and the essence of all of these. Thus, to give an arbitrary listing, directors who have openly declared their debt to the film range from Satyajit Ray to Victor Erice (both saw it in epiphanic moments in the early 1950s), from Luis Buñuel (whose *Los Olvidados* (1950) was made part in homage and part as a challenge to *Bicycle Thieves*), to Ousmane Sembène, Abbas Kiarostami, Mohsen Makhmalbaf and Wang Xiaoshang, as well as to contrarians at the margins of Hollywood such as Robert Altman and Tim Burton. And this is to exclude the weighty presence it has held in the film culture of its country of origin, Italy, where tropes from the film have been frequently reprised, in parody (Maurizio Nichetti's tricksy *Ladri di saponette* (*The Icicle Thief*, 1989)) or in homage (Ettore Scola's *C'eravamo tanto amati* (*We All Loved Each Other So Much*, 1974); Gianni Amelio's *Ladro di bambini* (*The Stolen Children*, 1992); Roberto Benigni's *La vita è bella* (*Life Is Beautiful*, 1997)).

Although the critical reputation of *Bicycle Thieves* has faded somewhat since its peak in the 1950s – since 'arthouse' film took its formalist and experimental turn with the New Waves of the 1960s[6] – it remains a fundamental staging-post in the history of the European cinema. As Godfrey Cheshire puts it, 'much of modern cinema can seem to flow from twin fountain-heads: Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane* (1941) and Vittorio De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves* (1948)'.[7] But its importance is not only forward-looking in perspective; it also draws out and revives strands of cinema apparently lost in the era of silent pictures, from Chaplin to Flaherty to King Vidor (De Sica cited all

three as influences). As another American critic, J. Hoberman, put it in 1998, '*The Bicycle Thief* looks back at the nickelodeon and forward to the European art film. De Sica's masterpiece was not so much part of a new wave as the crest of an old one – the epitome of movies as a popular modernism.'[8]

Of course, there is a buzzword missing in this sweep through the film's rapid impact and global success. *Bicycle Thieves* came towards the tail end of a cluster of extraordinary films to come out of late-1940s' Italy, prompted by the aftermath of war, dictatorship and a strongly felt need for collective social and cultural renewal. These films are brought together under the label 'neo-realism' or 'neorealism'. *Bicycle Thieves* has invariably and rightly been read as a key entry in the neorealist canon, and it is as much the combined power of that canon as it is any single film that exerted such a powerful pull on the world's audiences, critics and film-makers. And yet, it can be argued that *Bicycle Thieves* (among others) could do with rescuing from the dead weight of that label, and from the overworked and oversimplified uses to which it has been put. The neorealist label has sometimes helped us forget this film's workings as a crafted piece of film narrative, with far more to tell us than what a particular '-ism' was or wasn't; and the label has acted as a barrier to seeing in close detail the connections between the film and the struggling, changing world in which it was made (a connection that is a pivotal element of neorealist aesthetics, but which can all too easily get occluded by talk of the -ism itself).

Bicycle Thieves is ripe for re-viewing, with a little more sensitivity to its extraordinary vitality and inventive narrative, its rich, grounded texture, its subtle geometry and choreography, and its unashamed interest in moving us to tears, as part and parcel of its project for a new cinema. We need to know a little about neorealism, certainly, but also to look at how this film resonates with some extra power above and beyond its neorealist hinterland. Part of this process will be to look at the hybridities, transitions and uncertainties in a film all too often condescended to as a sort of simplistic fable.

Or rather, it will involve looking at how the film constantly interweaves and plays off against each other a sense of the one-dimensional, of simplicity, and senses of layered, multidimensional, overdetermined complexity. It will also involve situating the film in its time, looking at its production history as its own creative and commercial process, not only as an illustration of neorealist principles. *Bicycle Thieves* deserves to be looked at anew because the very ways in which it has been canonised as one of the few unarguably fundamental films in the history of cinema, have sometimes served to reduce it to its most facile heart, at one and the same time both to glorify and to deaden it.

1 Italy, 1948

Quite some care is taken in *Bicycle Thieves* to eliminate explicit date-markers,[9] but it is nevertheless a film profoundly of the here and now, of Italy in 1948.

Two days before Zavattini put the finishing touches to his screenplay, Italy had gone to the polls. The elections of 18 April 1948 still stand as the most momentous in the country's history, a watershed as profound as any since the unification of the modern nation-state of Italy in 1861. They were the first parliamentary elections after twenty-one years of Fascist rule (1922–43); the first under the finely wrought, new Republican Constitution which had come into effect on 1 January 1948; and the first in which women had the vote. And they set the seal on the shape of politics and society in Italy for the following fifty years. *Bicycle Thieves* was, then, forged in the precise weeks and months when Italy was poised on an extraordinary cusp, between the endgame of a long age of dictatorship and war, and a long postwar future of difficult, but sustained democracy, prosperity and modernisation. More locally and perhaps more pertinently, 1948 also marked the end point of a five-year interregnum between Fascism and democracy, war and peace, lasting from the mid-war ousting of Mussolini in 1943, through nearly two years of a dog-end dictatorship, civil war and double occupation before Liberation in April 1945, followed by three years of delicate nation (re)building.[10]

The single redeeming feature of this recent history for many Italians – and the foundation upon which a new, democratic Italy was to be built – was the partisan Resistance, which had significantly aided in the task of obstructing and then defeating the Nazis and their remaining Fascist allies during the period 1943–5. And the largest force in the Resistance was Communist. The Communists'

heroic role in this struggle, together with the famous declaration by their leader, Palmiro Togliatti, on his return from exile in Moscow in 1944, that the Party would pursue democratic rather than revolutionary politics, propelled the Italian Communist Party (PCI) into becoming a million-strong force within months of the Liberation. From 1943 and continuing after 1945, a broad coalition of anti-Fascist forces – Communists, Christian Democrats (DC), socialists, liberals – guided the nation through to a democratic future. Once established in government, the coalition staged a referendum which voted by a slim margin to abolish the monarchy, drafted the new constitution, (half-heartedly) purged parts of the Fascist state and amnestied others.

Meanwhile, as across all of postwar Europe, Italy's social and economic fabric was threadbare, where it was not entirely shot to pieces. The injection of American infrastructural economic support under the Marshall Plan had not yet begun – indeed the promise of Marshall funds, and the Plan's possible delay or cancellation if Communists came to power, was a key issue in the 1948 campaign – and housing shortages and unemployment, especially among the millions of conscripts returning from fighting or from imprisonment, ran higher and higher into the late 1940s. Official figures indicate 1,700,000 unemployed (8.9 per cent) in 1948 and the real figure was certainly considerably higher than that, possibly more than double.[11] Antonio Ricci, unemployed for two years at the start of the film, was far from alone in his struggle to find work.

Partly as an inevitable result of the establishment of a democratic political process, with mass parties and open ideological divisions along Cold War lines; partly as a result of socio-economic conditions; and partly as a result of opportunist politicking, the coalition government could not hold. In spring 1947 (a few weeks before Zavattini and De Sica would first discuss filming *Bicycle Thieves*), the Christian Democrats under Alcide de Gasperi excluded the Communists from government and the stage was set for the grand electoral stand-off a year later.

The election campaign was fought out with intense ferocity between two dominant blocs, the DC on the centre-right, with the none-too-hidden support of the Vatican and the covert support of the CIA; and the Popular Democratic Front (i.e., the PCI, with the socialists), supported and monitored from Moscow. The result was literally epoch-making: the DC won handsomely – by 48 per cent to the PDF's 31 per cent – and would remain in sole or coalition government until the 1990s. The PCI was nevertheless firmly established as the dominant opposition force: excluded from national power, it would remain a massive political and cultural presence throughout the Cold War era. The DC would consolidate its hold on the state briskly, including intervening with increasing aggression to rein in what it saw as the unfortunate penchant of one sector of the film industry for portraying the nation as excessively poor, oppressive and unjust.

The sector the new government – and especially a junior arts minister named Giulio Andreotti (later to become the most powerful politician of his generation in Italy) – had in mind was the loose tendency in postwar Italian cinema that was, by 1948, already widely known as 'neorealism'. *Bicycle Thieves* was to become one of its most lauded exemplars, but also one of its last triumphs at the start of a phase of retrenchment, so that the film stands at this other cusp also, at both the high point and the end point of the 'heroic' phase of neorealism.

Attempts at definition of neorealism often revolve around questions of start dates (1942? 1945?) and end dates (1948? 1952? 1955? etc.); and more or less flexible lists of film-makers (Roberto Rossellini, Luchino Visconti, De Sica, Zavattini, Giuseppe De Santis and possibly several more), films (anything from eight to sixty to over 200, but certainly including Rossellini's war trilogy, *Roma città aperta* (*Rome Open City*, 1945), *Paisà* (1946) and *Germania anno zero* (*Germany Year Zero*, 1948); Visconti's *La terra trema* (*The Earth Trembles*, 1948); and De Sica and Zavattini's four collaborations between 1946 and 1952) and points of film style (location shooting,

natural lighting, contemporary subject matter such as war, Resistance and poverty, non-professional actors and local voices, naturalistic editing and cinematography including a prevalence of medium and long shots, and long takes). It is seen as a rejection both of Hollywood (and its imitations in 1930s' Italy, where De Sica had made his name as an actor) and of Fascist aestheticism and rhetoric, to be replaced by a cinema of the everyday and of the common man or woman.

These are all useful indicators, but neorealism was also more diffuse and more elusive, more embedded in the larger history of Italy between 1943 and 1948 than such checklists allow. It was the prime response within the cultural sphere (in art, architecture, literature, theatre, cinema) to the transition from war to democracy. And its successes meant that the cultural sphere became an intensely important and highly politicised site of public debate and competition over the shaping of the new Italy. Italo Calvino famously characterised neorealism as a shared emotion, an affective sense of belonging to a community yearning for renewal, as much as a programme with a fixed aesthetic or ideology.[12] Neither Rossellini nor De Sica were political animals; they are better characterised as 'humanists' and, in Visconti's 1943 formulation, the cinema they dreamed of was an 'anthropomorphic cinema'.[13] Visconti, however, and others such as Giuseppe De Santis were committed Communists and the movement derived much of its energy and allegiance from the left, expressing an acute need for social renewal and reform, especially for the poor. Practitioners regularly found support from the PCI: the party funded *The Earth Trembles*, for example; and the party daily, *L'Unità*, sponsored screenings of *Bicycle Thieves* in several cities. There was never a formal grouping of neorealists, but there were frequent encounters, clusters, networks and overlapping crews between key films, as well as key journals, cultural initiatives (e.g. cinema clubs: Zavattini was instrumental in setting up the Rome *circolo del cinema* where *Bicycle Thieves* had its première) or protests (e.g. the February 1948 'Movement for the Defence of Italian Cinema', or 1949 protests against film legislation), so that many of the players within neorealism and the wider film industry were in close, active contact.

The year 1948 marked a striking moment of achievement and transition in neorealism. *Bicycle Thieves* followed the release earlier in the year of two extraordinary, but also strikingly strained or 'extreme' entries in the neorealist canon, Rossellini's *Germany Year Zero* and Visconti's *The Earth Trembles*. Both Rossellini and Visconti would move in striking new, non-realist directions for their next major projects (Rossellini made *Stromboli*, 1950, with Ingrid Bergman; Visconti made *Bellissima*, 1951, with Anna Magnani). Hollywood continued to pour both past and present products into the Italian market, where spectatorship was buoyant; and the local film studios, Cinecittà, opened on the edges of Rome by Mussolini in 1937, finally returned to active production in 1948 after years of war-induced interruption, marking an upturn in local commercial production (the huge Ancient Roman drama *Fabiola*, directed by Alessandro Blasetti, appeared in 1949). Meanwhile, as we have seen, committed cinema was under attack, for precisely the same reason that brought its success: because it tapped into the fraught social and political divisions of the day. Neorealism was under considerable strain, in other words, as the conditions that brought it into being waned and this would only be confirmed after the April elections.

The political atmosphere in Italy in the weeks and months after the election of 18 April 1948, as the cast and crew of *Bicycle Thieves* were shooting on the streets of Rome, remained febrile. The stability of the new Republic was by no means certain and the threat of political violence was still in the air. Europe had not yet settled into its long-term Cold War shape (in 1948 alone, the Communists faltered in the Greek civil war; Stalin broke with Tito; Communist rule was established in Poland and Czechoslovakia). On 14 July, in Rome, Togliatti was shot three times and left in a coma, and the government and state looked decidedly fragile. Protesters poured onto the streets, calling for insurrection; a handful were killed, a

general strike called and the demonstrations banned by the authoritarian Interior Minister Mario Scelba. (Scelba's police enforcers, the 'Nucleo Celere', are seen in *Bicycle Thieves* driving off to a demonstration.) Togliatti and the PCI calmed the crisis – as did, according to political folklore, the stunning success of the great cyclist Gino Bartali in the Tour de France in the days of the crisis – but it was clearer than ever that Italy was a society divided and fragile, shot through with structural weaknesses and inequalities, and any number of unresolved legacies.

None of this momentous public, national history is forced onto screen in *Bicycle Thieves*: and yet its resonances and its consequences within ordinary lives are exactly what the film set out to chronicle in its telling of one man's story over one weekend in Rome. If the macro-history is not worn on the sleeve, it is there, coded in the film's narrative and visual form and style (even in the bicycle itself), quite as much as the film is a collation of neorealist shibboleths. So, mass unemployment, rooted in the war, and the crises of identity it produced, are the deep causes of Antonio's problems. He has been unemployed for two years, when, we can surmise, he returned from the army, perhaps from an Allied or German prison camp (the friend who fetches him when his name is called in the opening scene is wearing an Italian army hat). The ideological divide between the PCI and the Church/DC is staged in two extended sequences, one set in a Communist workers' club (*casa del popolo*) and the other at a charity Mass. Class division is on comic display in the scene in a restaurant, as proletariat and *haute bourgeoisie* stare each other down across the class divide. The state and its institutions are there too, in the shape of the police, and talk of political meetings and demonstrations; in the public employment system, providing labour for some, but precious few; or in the public-housing project on the periphery of Rome where Antonio and his family live, Fascist in origin but now adapting to postwar housing needs. The film is also peppered with hints at the transition to a more prosperous, but also more disorienting modernity that awaits Italy in the 1950s. Finally, all of

Italy's recent, convulsive history is signalled quietly in the Ricci family itself. Bruno is around eight years' old, born just as Europe went to war (Enzo Staiola was born in November 1939), and quite probably separated from his father during the war (hence, perhaps, his resilience and maturity beyond his years). His baby sister, glimpsed in one scene, is weeks' old, born at another moment of momentous change, perhaps in April 1948 itself, figuring a future for the family and the nation, but one that the film shows as darkly threatened by injustice and poverty.

Some would criticise *Bicycle Thieves* from the left, arguing that it was not hard-edged enough in its engagement with the ideological questions of the day, preferring pathos to prescription. And yet this was precisely the balancing act Zavattini and De Sica set out to perform: to imbricate every frame with the charged particularities of Italy in 1948 and its overwhelming back-history and to use a sophisticated art of storytelling of everyday lives as a means both to analyse and to share the problems faced in the society at large.[14] It was this possibility that Zavattini saw intuitively when he first came across Bartolini's novel in July 1947.

2 Making *Bicycle Thieves*[15]

Bicycle Thieves was written, shot, edited and released between mid-1947 and late 1948. Its production history does not tell of an artisanal, penniless, improvised and purist project that stereotypes of neorealism suggest, but rather something closer to the mix found in much independent, but commercial film-making. It is a story of a gathering of talented individuals – perhaps even some individuals of genius – with some ideas for a film; of teamwork and planning, creative solutions and risks, improvising and arguing, coming together and falling out. All the main players were juggling other film work – acting, directing, writing, shooting, editing, dubbing etc. for dozens of other contemporary productions, in different modes and genres – and other cultural activities. It is also a story of precarious finances, of travels around Europe to beg from backers, even flirting with big-money Americans; of lawsuits, threatened and real; of promotion, gossip and self-promotion. In other words, it looks like a typical product of a precarious, but renascent Italian film industry.

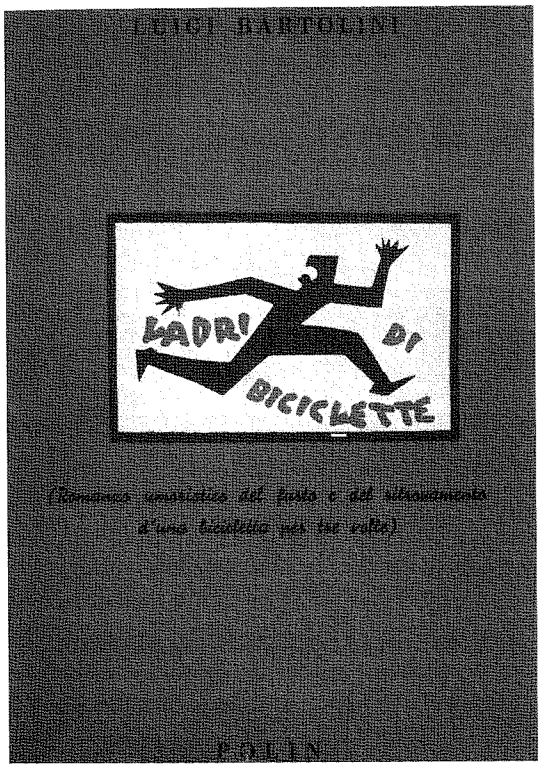
This is not to say that behind the film, there were not also at stake profound principles, articulate ideas and an aesthetic or ideological project for what a new cinema might be. In the mix with the commercial and contingent features of film production, there were elements that were unusual, indicative of that dream of another cinema; and perhaps the strongest evidence of this – far from any improvised quality – was the very intensity and engaged kind of care and attention lavished on the film over its long gestation.

In July 1947, De Sica was forty-five years' old and Zavattini – known to friends as 'Za' – was forty-four. Both were living in Rome. Zavattini was a creative torrent of a man, a comic and an intellectual in equal measure. Between 1935 and 1950, he wrote twenty-five

screenplays and around sixty treatments; and he would provide much of the intellectual ballast for the neorealist movement, in essays such as his much-quoted 'Some Ideas on the Cinema'.[16] Raised in the Emilia-Romagna region near Parma, before working in Milan and then, from 1940, in Rome, he had written experimental novels, was a decent artist, had contributed to and set up magazines, and worked with publishers, particularly Bompiani in Milan. He gravitated towards cinema in the 1930s (famously writing a fake Hollywood gossip column for *Cinema illustrazione* between 1930 and 1934) and took up screenwriting on Mario Camerini's sparkling comedy *Darò un milione* (*I'll Give a Million*, 1935), starring Assia Noris and a certain Vittorio De Sica. De Sica was raised in Naples and worked as a stage actor from an early age. He had appeared in a film as early as 1917, but became a comic and romantic lead and heart-throb from the early 1930s, especially after starring in Camerini's 1932 *Gli uomini, che mascalzoni!* (*What Scoundrels Men Are!*), *Il signor Max* (1937) and *Grandi magazzini* (*Department Store*, 1939).[17] He took up directing in 1940, and on one early film, *Teresa Venerdì* (1941), Zavattini was an uncredited writer. In 1943, with *I bambini ci guardano* (*The Children Are Watching Us*), a moving, child-centred, contemporary story of a marriage in crisis and a key precursor (along with Visconti's *Ossessione*, 1942) of the neorealist moment, De Sica and Zavattini began forging one of the most successful film-making partnerships in cinema history.

Their next collaboration – *Shoeshine* – was a touching and tragic story of two boys living on the streets of Rome after the war, shining the shoes of American soldiers and dreaming of owning a horse. The boys end up in juvenile prison, turned against each other and crushed by a world of hostility and indifference. Released in April 1946, to great praise – it would be awarded a special Oscar in 1947 – it garnered little box-office success and by mid-1947, the pair were uncertain, struggling to find backers, spending time on various acting and writing jobs as they fished around for their next 'serious' collaboration.

In July, Zavattini happened to run into an acquaintance, Luigi Bartolini. Bartolini was a talented artist, a less talented writer, a fairweather Fascist and later anti-Fascist, and a capricious polemicist. He presented Zavattini with a copy of his little-read 1946 novel, *Bicycle Thieves*, subtitled 'A Comic Novel of the Theft and Recovery of a Bicycle, Three Times Over'. The novel is indeed comic, by turns picaresque, snobbishly satirical, self-mocking, grotesque and whimsically diaristic. Bartolini himself is the raconteur–protagonist and the setting is the baroque backstreets of central Rome during 1944, with the black market thriving and petty theft an everyday fact of life. The hero – with some brio and much arrogance – navigates



The cover of the first edition of Bartolini's novel. The artwork is by Bartolini himself

this underworld, following thieves, low-lifes and prostitutes until he tricks his way towards getting his (or rather a) bicycle back.

Zavattini read the book, gripped, in one night, and called De Sica to announce that they had found their project. He sketched out a film treatment, swapping Bartolini's fey, autobiographical gentleman-detective hero for a poor, working-class man, a vessel for a study of poverty in contemporary Italy. He called Bartolini and asked for the adaptation rights to the novel. A contract was drawn up on 22 July: for 100,000 lire, Bartolini agreed that the adaptation could be entirely free, as long as the title was his and his name featured on the credits. In return, Zavattini put in a good word for the reissue of the novel, which appeared again in 1948, published by Longanesi.

During August, September and October, the first phase of the meticulous planning of the screenplay was underway, with Zavattini in charge, aided by De Sica and a number of others, including one of the most talented and important of all neorealist screenwriters, Sergio Amidei. Amidei had worked with De Sica and Zavattini on *Shoeshine* and he would work on all of Roberto Rossellini's war trilogy. He had been active in the Communist Resistance during the occupation of Rome, and he was more focused in his political commitments than either Rossellini or De Sica. A teenage Sergio Leone – who would work as a gopher on the set of *Bicycle Thieves* (and was drafted in as one of the chattering German clerics who shelter from the rain with Antonio and Bruno at Porta Portese) – witnessed one of the early script meetings between Amidei, De Sica and Zavattini. Zavattini, he recalled, wanted Antonio and Bruno's mortadella lunch to be wrapped in *L'Unità*, the Communist Party daily newspaper. Amidei was furious – 'what the fuck has the PCI got to do with it!' – while De Sica suggested using a partly red apple as a compromise. This much-rehearsed, and in more than one way confusing anecdote (after all, Amidei was the most Communist among them), tells us two things: first, the politics of this committed group of film-makers was on a knife edge, between the risks of propaganda and rhetoric and the need to address issues of class struggle and exploitation; second,

Roma, 22 luglio 1947

Caro Zavattini,

con la presente lettera, che ha valore di contratto, ti cedo per sempre, a tutti gli effetti, per l'Italia e per l'Estero, i diritti di riduzione cinematografica del mio libro "LADRI DI BICICLETTE", per la somma di lire CENTOMILA da versarmi lire diecimila subito e novantamila entro il mese di agosto, autorizzandoti a apportare al racconto tutte quelle modifiche che saranno credute opportune da te o dai tuoi collaboratori o da chiunque lavorerà alla realizzazione cinematografica di "Ladri di biciclette".

Dichiaro inoltre a tutti gli effetti che a tua volta puoi cedere a chi e come vuoi il presente contratto i cui impegni sono e restano per me immutabili.

Pongo come sola condizione che il titolo dell'opera nella versione italiana deve restare " Ladri di biciclette" e deve risultare da un sottotitolo che il soggetto è la riduzione di chimhessia sono tratti (liberamente o no) dal racconto omonimo di Luigi Bartolini.

La presente vale anche come ricevuta delle diecimila lire di cui sopra.

In fede,

Luigi Bartolini

Io sottoscritto Cesare Zavattini controfirmo la presente per accettazione.

Cesare Zavattini

The contract letter of 22 July 1947 between Zavattini and Bartolini (Courtesy of Archivio Cesare Zavattini)

the attention to detail in the making of the film was extraordinarily high. Little or nothing was left to chance.

Amidei fell out with Zavattini over *Bicycle Thieves*: he walked out at some point in late 1947/early 1948 and does not appear in the film's credits. The reason for his discontent, in most accounts, touched on what would become one of the fault lines in critical discussion of the film: where is the community or class solidarity here? Couldn't Antonio have borrowed a bicycle, from a friend, a comrade, the Party, the union? The riposte to this question – and one Amidei himself seemed to accept on the film's release, when he admitted that he had been wrong to abandon the film – was perhaps best expressed by André Bazin, in a gloss to his famous and now rather eccentric-sounding claim that *Bicycle Thieves* was the 'the only valid Communist film of the past decade': 'in the world in which this workman lives, the poor must steal from each other in order to survive'.[18] As the dialogue in the opening scene of the film immediately establishes, fellow workers with a bike want Antonio's job more than they want to help their fellow find his.

Amidei's departure coincided with the arrival of Suso Cecchi d'Amico (credited as Suso d'Amico), another writer who was to be enormously influential in the history of neorealism and of postwar Italian cinema generally. Alongside her, the credited writers included Oreste Biancoli, Adolfo Franci, Gherardo Gherardi and Gerardo Guerrieri; but Zavattini always had the controlling hand. He later took considerable offence that De Sica was garnering all the praise heaped on the film and that his name was hidden in the group credit, one of whom – Gherardi – was dying and credited merely as a gesture of friendship by De Sica. *Bicycle Thieves*, Zavattini insisted, was 90 per cent his own work.

The group worked together in intense exchanges over several months. They also experimented in location searches, which were closer to what we might think of as ethnographic fieldwork. Zavattini describes in a diary of this period how he, De Sica and the others would trawl around Rome visiting and observing sites,

play-acting roles to engage with street characters and even trying to persuade some of them to appear as themselves in the film. They spent days at Porta Portese market, looking at how the black market operated; they had a careful look at the *casa di tolleranza*, or public brothel, on Via di Panico, which would be the setting for a key scene; and they went several times to see a real clairvoyant known as La Santona (as she is in the film), posing as clients and imbibing the cluttered, eccentric ambience, which they would later reconstruct as the apartment in Via della Paglia.[19]

Meanwhile, De Sica was engaged in a somewhat desperate search for production funds. *Shoeshine* had failed financially and another film in the same vein was not an attractive proposition. With his international reputation as a director running ahead of his status at home, he made visits to London, Paris and Zurich in autumn 1947, meeting with Gabriel Pascal, among others. De Sica would act out the roles of the film himself, pitching with all his might before the moneymen. He famously had contact with David O. Selznick, who was keen to finance the film (and would later produce De Sica's ill-fated film *Stazione Termini* (*Indiscretion of an American Wife*, 1953), with Selznick's wife Jennifer Jones), but wanted to impose a bankable star such as Cary Grant. De Sica countered that Grant was too fey to play a worker, and suggested Henry Fonda (Fonda's Tom Joad in John Ford's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940; released in Italy in October 1947) may have struck De Sica as close to what he wanted for Antonio);[20] but it came to nothing. In the end, a Milanese aristocrat Count Cicogna came together with lawyer Ercole Graziadei and financier Sergio Bernardi to set up and fund an *ad hoc* production company – P.D.S. (Produzioni De Sica) – and they funded the film to the rather generous tune of approximately 100 million lire (roughly five times the budget of *Shoeshine*).[21] Distribution would be run by the state cinema body ENIC (Ente Nazionale Industrie Cinematografiche), for whom Graziadei worked.

The full treatment and screenplay were finished in April 1948.[22] The treatment was published in a magazine, *Bis*, in May, unleashing

the first in an interminable series of spats with Bartolini, who objected to the – as he saw it – degradation of his work. He threatened to sue, denying that he had ever signed away his rights to this degree, before being paid some more money, then forced to apologise when he began insulting Zavattini personally in print, only to return to the same old accusations later. When the film appeared, he was equally scathing in his comments.

The search was now on for actors: De Sica put out a radio announcement for the role of Bruno, screentesting dozens of boys, choosing one called Enzo Cerusico, before happening across Enzo Staiola after filming had already begun. Lamberto Maggiorani, a worker at the Breda arms factory on the edge of Rome, was the father of a boy put forward to play Bruno. De Sica spotted him in person (or in a photo, according to some accounts), and, drawn by his face and melancholy gait, called him for a test. He offered him the part of Antonio on condition that he return afterwards to his work at the Breda plant. Lianella Carell came to interview De Sica as a journalist, only to be offered the part of the wife, Maria. These oft-repeated casting anecdotes are usually adduced to show the role of non-professional actors, or 'real' people, at the heart of neorealism's aesthetic and production practices; but we should pause a little before buying into this. If Visconti doggedly cast Sicilian fishermen to play Sicilian fishermen in *The Earth Trembles*, and if Maggiorani was undoubtedly a working-class man playing the same, it is also true that De Sica's casting methods tack closer to Fellini's or Pasolini's than to Visconti's: that is, to a casting of people as raw material, as faces, looks, walks, which he as director (and as seasoned actor) could mould to his needs. And, as Visconti himself was to dissect in *Bellissima*, casting competitions were the stuff of celluloid fantasy, of stardom dreamed of by ordinary folk, as much as searches for grim authenticity.

Shooting began on 16 May 1948, with the *casa del popolo* sequence, and continued for two to three months (some scenes were reshot after that, including the ending). The film was shot on 35mm

Agfa-Gevaert panchromatic negative (Pancro 47), evident in the vivid variations of tone and light in the final product. If Zavattini had controlled and forged the screenplay with minute care, now De Sica was fully in charge. Zavattini later maintained that, once filming began, he disappeared, on this and on all his films. Working with cinematographer Carlo Montuori and a group of assistants, De Sica moved around the streets of Rome, teasing performances of extraordinary versatility and emotion, comic and tragic, out of his raw cast. Here, too, there are more or less credible anecdotes in abundance; about how he tricked Enzo Staiola into crying by planting cigarette stubs in his pockets and accusing him of theft; about how he arranged for the rain in the Porta Portese sequence to be faked with the help of the Rome fire brigade; about how he shot the scene of the bicycle theft in real time, without stopping the traffic, timing the theft to the traffic lights so that the thief could make his escape. Once again, the anecdotes suggest focused care and sophisticated planning and technology. The BFI archive contains a transcript of a radio broadcast in which Vernon Jarratt describes the theft scene at the Largo Tritone (see p. 39), a crossroads in central Rome 'that more or less corresponds to London's Oxford Circus':

> [De Sica and his assistant Umberto Scarpelli] worked out the operation with mathematical precision. They worked with six cameras that day, some concealed in cars, some in windows high up, one on top of a car, and one most important was concealed behind a man who stood lounging up against a shop reading a newspaper while behind him stood a man with an Arriflex [.] And at the precise moment the lounger with the newspaper said 3, 2, 1 and dropped his paper; the cameraman swung up this Arriflex, and the shot was in the can [.] The signal was given by Scarpelli. He stationed himself at a point on the far side of the Largo where he could be seen by all the crews and the three actors [ ] M-moment was the third yellow light after his crossing. On the third light the 'thief' seized his bicycle and set off downhill arriving just as the lights turned green in his favour so that he was able to race straight over; Antonio rushed after him on foot, but by then the lights were, as intended, red, so that he had to dart through traffic going against him [ ] The car with the camera on its roof followed him; the taxi on to the running board on which he jumps came alongside promptly on its cue, the accomplice jumped on the other running board, and, again, the shot was in the can. They made only two takes [ ][23]

Most of *Bicycle Thieves* was shot on location; but there was some studio shooting also, carried out not at Cinecittà, but at the S.A.F.A. studios on the Celio hill in Rome. And here, during September and October, the meticulous process of editing took place, with De Sica and his editor Eraldo Da Roma, assisted by Zavattini once more (Zavattini would later claim he was responsible for much of the editing). The haunting, many would say over-sentimental score by Alessandro Cicognini was added. Voices were dubbed onto the soundtrack. This was common practice in Italian film production – in any case, sound cameras would have been prohibitively inflexible and expensive – but less common was the all-pervasive heavily Romanised Italian, preserved from screenplay to final dub. Precious little information has survived on who dubbed the voices, as indeed on the names of many of the bit-part actors: Alberto Sordi – later to become the greatest comic actor of his generation in Italy, but in the 1940s best known as the Italian voice of Oliver Hardy – dubbed the stall-holder at Piazza Vittorio market accused by Antonio of selling his stolen bike (see p. 39). A figure called Mario Bucciarelli possibly dubbed Antonio.[24]

By late October, select journalists were writing of having seen a rough-cut of the film, although still without soundtrack. All through production, and certainly through the shooting period, occasional articles and interviews appeared in the film press and newspapers. Coverage included, among other things, stories about two fires at the S.A.F.A. studio, which nearly destroyed the film during editing. Press interest and promotional coverage continued with the release of the film, with De Sica and cast members attending the première at the Cinema Barberini on 22 November and also screenings in different

cities around Italy into early 1949, with comment, gossip or readers' surveys about the film popping up in local media wherever they went. Nicola Chiaromonte, writing for the American journal *Partisan Review*, vividly evoked the buzz at the Rome première:

> That Sunday, at the Barberini, filmologists and smart people were completely submerged by the haughtiest crowd that ever attended a preview: the actors of the film, with their families and their families' friends, their acquaintances, their acquaintances' acquaintances, etcetera. They all came in their Sunday best from the poor sections and suburbs of Rome where (with the help of a few radio announcements) De Sica had picked up his stars one by one. The theatre was packed [. . .] When the show was over, there was a good fifteen minutes' bedlam. People screamed 'Long live De Sica'.[25]

3 Nothing Happens: A Synopsis

Sixteen months of work by Zavattini, De Sica and their crew produced a film of around ninety minutes in which, apparently, nothing or next-to-nothing happens. Its subject is hardly worth 'two lines in a stray-dog column [. . .] nothing happens [. . .] that might just as well not have happened', as André Bazin famously put it (this in praise of the film).[26] Certainly, *Bicycle Thieves* is studiedly slow, drifting, repetitive and circular in its progress: at the start, Antonio has no bike and no job, and at the end, for all his peregrinations, the same holds. In between, the story is strung out, radically attenuated compared to the action-driven, cause-and-effect sequencing of classical Hollywood motion-pictures, with their arcs of crisis and resolution. For Bazin, as for Zavattini, it was the de-dramatization of the narrative that created the conditions for the film's realism, for its contact with phenomenal reality. Lived lives are not shaped like stories, but move in messy sequences, not going anywhere in particular. *Bicycle Thieves* seems to share this quality; there is much motion – wandering, movement from one place to the next, searching; what Siegfried Kracauer called 'the flow of life'[27] – and there is a fair amount of trial and emotion; but little action or resolution. Instead, the film describes and nudges us to interpret a textured, articulated world, in which the smallest of objects or interactions are heavy with both human experience and meaning. A great deal 'takes place' or takes its place on screen in *Bicycle Thieves*, even if not a great deal happens.

One side-effect of this is that the film is peculiarly hard to summarize: because it is hard to know what to leave out and because the film is defined not so much by events, as by glimpsed presences and looks (in both senses of the word).

The story plays out over three days – Friday, Saturday, Sunday – in Rome, some time in mid-1948. As the credits roll, an employment official arrives by bus in Val Melaina, a housing development on the city's outskirts. Jostled by a crowd of men, he calls out for 'Ricci'. Antonio Ricci is fetched over and offered a job as a bill-poster, but he'll need a bike, he's told. Disconsolate, he searches out his wife, Maria, at the water-pipe. As they walk home, we learn he has recently pawned his bike to pay for food. Maria doggedly resolves to pawn their bedlinen to redeem the bike, and they head for the pawnbrokers to make the exchange. Antonio registers for work at the central Rome warehouse, as Maria waits outside. Elated, they ride off together to visit a clairvoyant, La Santona (Ida Bracci Dorati), in Via della Paglia, whose help Maria had sought in finding work for Antonio.

A fade-out takes us to dawn on Saturday. The bike is back at home, being proudly buffed up by Bruno, Antonio and Maria's eight-year-old son. An infant lies on a bed, Maria sews Antonio's cap and prepares lunch packs, and playfully chides Antonio in his new uniform ('You look like a policeman!'). Father and son ride off to work together, Bruno at a petrol station, Antonio in his new job. After some instructions on how to paste up his posters, Antonio is on his own with bucket and ladder.

As he is pasting up a busty image of Rita Hayworth in Via Francesco Crispi, near a busy city-centre junction, three shifty men circle his bike. One (played by Vittorio Antonucci) steals it and rides off; the others act as decoys, diverting Antonio's desperate chase in the wrong direction down a tunnel. Antonio, distraught and breathless, returns to his ladder. He reports the theft at the police station, but the officer (Peppino Spadaro) is indifferent. He heads back to pick up Bruno by tram, disconsolate and shoved aside in the bus queue at the city gates (Porta Pia). He and Bruno walk back to Val Melaina. Antonio heads for the *casa del popolo*, where a political meeting and some amateur dramatics are taking place, to seek out a friend, Baiocco (Gino Saltamerenda), who interrupts rehearsals to offer help. Maria arrives, distraught also, and heads home with Antonio (and out of the film).

Sunday takes us on a long, frustrating journey around Rome, as Antonio and Bruno look for the bike. First they meet Baiocco and his crew (Bagonghi, Meniconi) at Piazza Vittorio, a market notorious for selling stolen goods. After much searching, Antonio thinks he recognises his bike frame, but when a policeman (Checco Rissone) forces the seller to check the serial number, it turns out he was wrong. They head for the other main city market at Porta Portese. They arrive in a rain shower and take shelter next to a group of young clerics chatting away in German. As the rain clears, Antonio spots the thief talking to an old tramp (Giulio Chiari). The thief rides off and Antonio and Bruno give chase, but he's too quick; so father and son cut back and look for the tramp in the quiet streets nearby. Bruno stops to pee, but Antonio shouts out to follow him: the old man is heading across the Tiber and into a church (Saints Nereo and Achille), where a charity soup kitchen and Mass is underway. In a lengthy sequence in the church, set in among the crowd of the poor and the haughty charity marshals (Elena Altieri, Michele Sakara), Antonio follows, nudges, cajoles and threatens the old man, until finally, he gives up the thief's address (Via or Vicolo della Campanella, 15), but then runs off. Antonio and Bruno chase again, but he has slipped away through a hidden doorway. Antonio takes out his frustrations on Bruno, slapping him, and Bruno sulks.
As Antonio goes to look for the tramp along the riverbank, there are cries for help as a boy nearly drowns playing in the Tiber. Antonio is terrified for a moment that it might be Bruno. When he sees Bruno dutifully waiting for him on the monumental bridge stairway above, his relief is palpable.

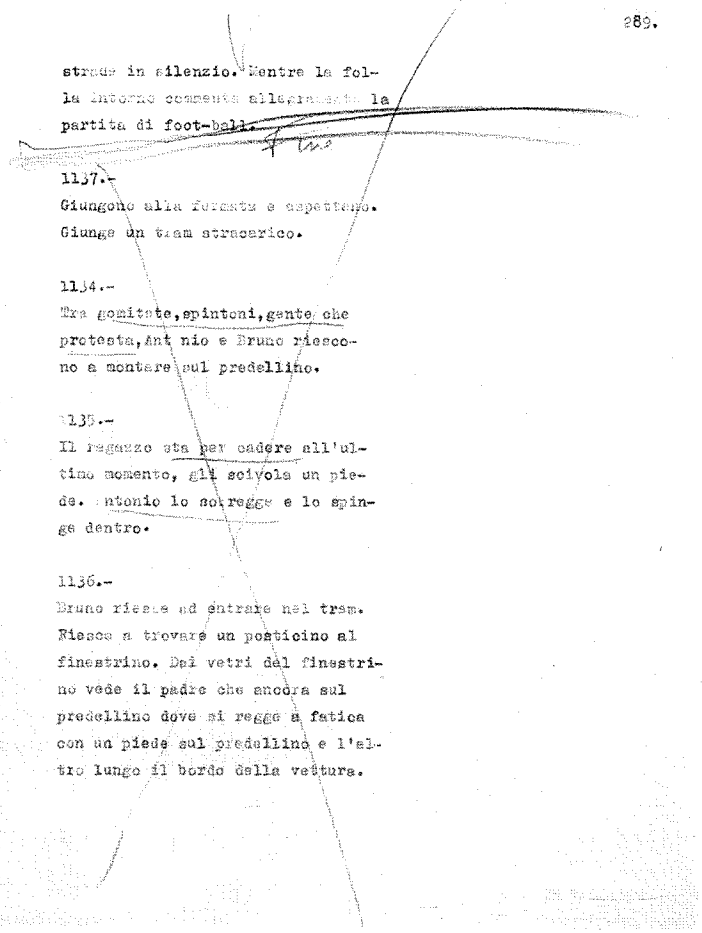
Reconciled but tired, the two chat beside the river about football (a crowd of fans drive by, on their way to the match). Antonio takes Bruno to a trattoria and blows some of the little money he has on food (*mozzarella in carrozza*) and wine. A band plays Neapolitan music; a wealthy family with a snooty young boy (Massimo Randisi) eat their fill at the next table, casting contemptuous glances over at Bruno. Antonio cannot stop thinking

of the bike and the wage it would have brought in. Slightly drunk and maudlin, Antonio decides to try Maria's way, to visit the clairvoyant La Santona.

Returning to Via della Paglia, Antonio edges in hesitantly and waits, as La Santona gives some advice to a forlorn-looking suitor ('You're ugly, my boy, you're ugly!'). Bruno cuts to the front of the queue and she offers her disdainfully gnomic advice on the bike: 'Either you find it straight away, or never again.' Baffled, Antonio heads out into the deserted backstreet in Trastevere, and at that very moment, the thief walks by.

He runs off into a brothel on Via di Panico. Antonio follows him (boys cannot enter) and finds him with the ladies and their madam as they are eating Sunday lunch. After some pushing and shoving and arguing, Antonio and the thief head outside. We are now on the thief's home street (Vicolo della Campanella), and a crowd gathers around Antonio as he insists that the thief (whose name we learn is Alfredo Catelli) return his bike. A couple of local hoods – one in a suit and menacing dark glasses – appear. Alfredo collapses in what looks like an epileptic fit and his desperate mother appears, which only exacerbates the hostility of the crowd. Antonio risks getting lynched. A clownish neighbour douses the scene with a bucket of water and, meanwhile, Bruno has gone to fetch a carabiniere, who calmly takes things in hand. He, Antonio and Bruno go up into Alfredo's one-room apartment. He searches and asks Antonio questions, as the mother defends her family's integrity, and the crowd waits below.

Antonio understands it is hopeless; he gives up, pushing his way through the crowd and away, stony-faced. Bruno lags behind as he strides on down streets, steps, across avenues. Bruno is nearly knocked down by two cars. Antonio is heading for a tram-stop, defeated and demoralised, but this takes him near to the football stadium on Via Flaminia, where the match – Roma–Modena – is coming to its climax. Antonio and Bruno rest on a pavement by the tram-stop. Thousands of fans' bikes are lined up in front of them;



289.

strada in silenzio. Mentre la folla intorno commenta allegramente la partita di foot-ball.

1137.-
Giungono alla fermata e aspettano. Giunge un tram stracarico.

1134.-
Tra gomitate, spintoni, gente che protesta, Antonio e Bruno riescono a montare sul predellino.

1135.-
Il ragazzo sta per cadere all'ultimo momento, gli scivola un piede. Antonio lo sorregge e lo spinge dentro.

1136.-
Bruno riesce ad entrare nel tram. Riesce a trovare un posticino al finestrino. Dai vetri del finestrino vede il padre che ancora sul predellino dove si regge a fatica con un piede sul predellino e l'altro lungo il bordo della vettura.

The final scene in Zavattini's screenplay (SC, p. 289), with the start of a long, extended, alternative ending scored out by hand (Courtesy of Archivio Cesare Zavattini)

a group of racing bikes rushes past. Antonio is anguished, mocked by this taunting vision of multitudes of bicycles. Bruno is exhausted. In a complex sequence of shot/reverse shots, close-ups, medium and long shots, Antonio spots a lone bicycle propped up against a wall. As the match ends and thousands of fans empty into the square, he tells Bruno to get the tram home and edges towards the lone bike, grabs it and rides off.

The owner and six passers-by run him to ground, as Antonio veers into the milling crowd. Halfway through the chase, we cut to a close-up and pan-round of an appalled Bruno, who has missed his tram and who turns now to see his father, as a thief, and then, worse, a captured thief. Antonio is being shoved around and hauled off to the police, when Bruno wriggles into the surrounding crowd, wailing for his father. The bike owner sees Bruno and takes pity; he decides not to bother and the baying crowd reluctantly lets him go.

Antonio is dishevelled, humiliated, abject, his hat creased and crushed on the ground (Bruno hands it to him); no bike, no dignity left. Staring into the distance, he walks on, and, for the first time, breaks down in tears. Bruno, beside him, stumbling, also staring straight ahead, takes his father's hand in his and they walk off into the crowd.

4 The Bicycle and Beyond

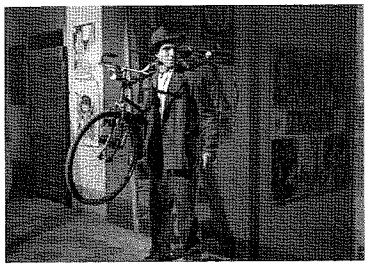
The great trick pulled off by *Bicycle Thieves*, its formal sleight of hand, is to give us the thinnest of narrative threads – man loses bike; man searches for bike – and to generate around it a dense, pullulating world, like the energised electromagnetic field circulating a wire. The trick has us constantly looking in at least three different directions: we follow the storyline (where is the bicycle?); we inhabit the place (Rome, 1948); and we feel for the people (for Antonio and his lurching confusions, for Bruno and his struggle to live beyond his years, and, briefly but tellingly, for Maria, and the sheer weight of those pails of water and of carrying her mildly depressed, mildly inept husband through troubled times). Narrative form, socio-geographical field, lived lives: these three constantly interact and mutually shape each other and our responses to the film. Each of them is carried by a dense array of profilmic paraphernalia – people, objects, movement – and patterns and matrices to connect them, in a potent bricolage. They are what gives the film its extraordinary force and they will give shape to the account of it that follows here.

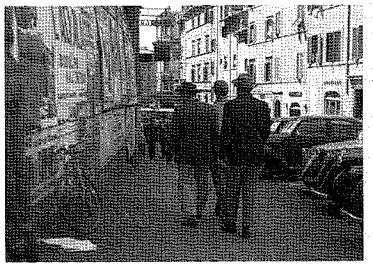
The narrative form of *Bicycle Thieves* is itself a taut combination of distilled simplicity – that central thread – and patterned complexity. To begin to get a sense of its workings, it is worth dwelling a little on the material object and icon that lies, strangely compelling, at its heart: the bicycle.

Bicycle Thieves is, surreptitiously, a highly self-conscious film, commenting regularly on its own workings. The idea of building a story around a non-event comes in for a typically knowing nod at the police station, as Antonio reports the theft. 'Anything new, brigadier?', asks a hovering journalist. 'No, nothing. Just a bicycle', comes the throwaway reply.[28] The brigadier is right – there is nothing to interest the police, the

newspapers, anyone in a bicycle – but the film will strive to weave layer upon layer of significance onto this humble object, to show that the life of a man can depend on it. Earlier on, Maria had commented on the theft, countering the brigadier's view in advance (using another news image): 'it's not something [*una notizia*, literally a piece of news] that happens every day'. The police, the media and workers operate with starkly different values, about bicycles as about much else.

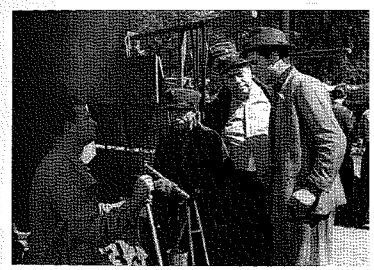
The bicycle distils Antonio's predicament into a single, simple image and event (without the bike he has no job, no future), and it crystallises the larger questions his predicament stands for. It is also an object-lesson in how *Bicycle Thieves* puts its primary materials to work at so many different, intersecting levels: it works as a purely formal narrative device; as an everyday object in the *mise en scène*; as a resonant symbol within the complex symbolic economy of the film; and also as an emblem of the particular moment of historical transition at which Antonio's world – Italy, 1948 – stands. It would





be hard to think of a more studiedly overdetermined (and more readily quotable) icon in film history.

As a formal device, the missing bicycle in *Bicycle Thieves* works rather as what Alfred Hitchcock famously termed a 'MacGuffin', like the missing falcon in *The Maltese Falcon* (John Huston, 1941); that is, an arbitrary, nonsense object that gives a narrative its suspense and pull (and much of its pleasure). In fact, the bike works doubly in this way: if the final hour of the film is structured as a search for the missing bike, the time leading up to the theft is, conversely, set up by the title of the film, and subsequently by judicious editing and cinematography, as a tense wait for the bike to be stolen. Again and again, the film has us wondering first if/when the bike will be stolen (Antonio clings onto it as if afraid of losing it; boys play around it outside La Santona's; urchins hover next to it; men eye it, before actually stealing it; see p. 38) and, then, if/when Antonio will find it (running towards the tunnel just after it is stolen; at the markets as he confronts first the wrong and then the right man; in the thief's home; see below). But the film also presents us with unerring evidence that he will never find it: we see the thousands of bike parts at Piazza Vittorio and we sense already that there is no chance. Yet the search keeps going, in its relentless cycle of hope and disappointment. By the time we



finally realise that it will never be found and that the film simply is not about that any more (if it ever was), it is too late: the pathos of the world on screen has replaced the intrigue of the search as our point of contact with the film. The MacGuffin has ended up telling us something about broken lives, about loss and humiliation.

The bicycle as MacGuffin tells us something of central importance about the method of *Bicycle Thieves*. De Sica and Zavattini readily draw on sophisticated film-making styles – from classic Hollywood suspense, silent comedy, melodrama, expressionism, musical, noir, etc. – but deploy them for the purpose of engaging with the world through film in new ways. We will see more of this.

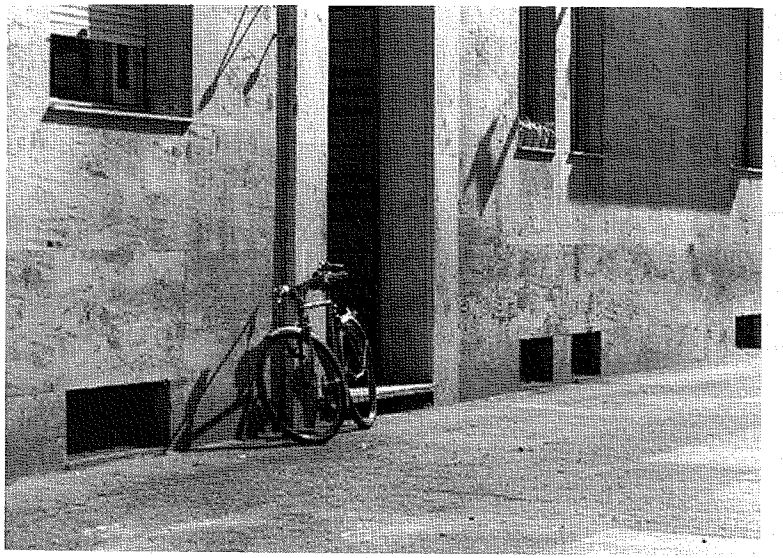
There is, of course, more than one bicycle in *Bicycle Thieves*. Rome is full of bikes, jostling with trams, buses, cars and pedestrians. In historical terms, this sheer material presence pitches the film at a very particular moment, a moment of economic and social transition between a traditional economy and society and a fully industrialised modernity. The bicycle as a piece of technology is poised between the

pre-modern world of labour-driven motion, of walking (*Bicycle Thieves* relentlessly traces the physiological toil of street-walking) and horse-drawn propulsion (in one deep-field shot, Antonio and Bruno are framed with a cart-horse in the background; see p. 40 and p. 38), and the speed-driven mechanics of the train, the plane and the automobile. Just as millions of cyclists on the streets of Beijing and Shanghai once represented a pre-industrialised, pre-capitalist China, now swept away by millions of polluting cars,[29] so Italy in 1948 was on the verge of its own plunge into capitalist modernity, symbolised in the 1950s by the spread of scooters and cars, Vespas, Lambrettas and Fiat 600s and 500s.[30] In this process, the bicycle would become detached from labour, from economic necessity, even for the poor, and become a leisure or sports object. The film shows us this process already at work, when a cluster of Sunday racing riders rushes by at the football stadium (p. 42), where thousands have come by bike to see the match.[31]

All these bicycles point not only to a historical moment, but also to a recurrent element in the film's symbolic economy: the dialectical interplay between the one and the many, between singularity and the undifferentiated mass. *Bicycle Thieves* returns obsessively and with careful visual work to this dialectic. So, Antonio is one unemployed man among many; Maria's pawned sheets and Antonio's redeemed bicycle are shown against vast store rooms of other pawned sheets (p. 42), packages and bikes; Antonio, proudly poised on bike with ladder, merges with the troop of bill-posters riding out to work; his poster of Rita Hayworth is one from a pile, one of dozens of other posters; he is one man queuing for a tram among many; the old tramp alone perhaps holds the key to Antonio's search, but he merges into a crowd of hundreds of destitute churchgoers; Alfredo is 'the thief', but the film teaches us that the city is full of thieves, and even Antonio will become one; and so on. The movement between Antonio's bicycle and the hundreds of others we see is the founding, structuring example of this interplay. Antonio's bicycle is marked in several ways as specific and unique, almost a

family member: we learn its make, 'Fides' (Latin for trust: critics have noted the moral, Christian resonances of this), its year (1935), its unique serial number (the screenplay gives it as 12313; SC, p. 80). Antonio's joy at recovering it, his gauche reluctance to let go of it as he reports to work, his affectionate ferrying of Maria around on it, bespeak the same care, even intimacy that we see when Bruno lovingly polishes it and spots a dent in it, and when he and Antonio proudly ride off on it together. It is the same care, too, that Bruno shows for his baby sister, shutting out the light before leaving so as not to wake her. But Antonio's bike first appears from among the hundreds of other pawned bicycles. Later, we see dizzying arrays of bikes and bike parts at Piazza Vittorio (filmed at an angle, in stylised, expressionist tracking shots; p. 44); a blurred mass of wheels through the teeming rain at Porta Portese; dozens of bikes riding to work or in the centre; and thousands at the stadium. Near the latter, another single bicycle stands propped up against a sunlit wall, hypnotically attractive in its isolation (p. 44). This is no longer Antonio's bicycle, just as he is no longer 'himself', but is about to fall into the anonymous category of 'thieves'. There are ideological, existential and psychological implications in this dialectic, and the film is interested in all of these. In this world, the one is always at risk of falling away into anonymity – and the hostility, physical danger and loss of difference – of the many, the crowd.

There is, further, an important economic dimension to both the literal and symbolic roles of the bicycle in the film. It marks a particular relationship of public ownership and labour to private property and space, first of all: Antonio's bike is a guarantee of autonomy, of the freedom to move around the city, to commute to a place of work, not to be thrust into the maelstrom of the bus queue or to be stuck out on the periphery. (Alfredo, too, moves about the city, on his criminal business, by bike.) In this, it is a small symbol of Antonio's individualism and capacity for self-improvement, of his enterprise and labour, of his entry into a petty bourgeoisie. It is also a vessel for the shifting roles of money, exchange practices and notions of value within each of the institutions



or 'work'-places Antonio moves through – the employment office, the pawnbroker's, the poster warehouse, the market, the black market (and the clairvoyant's, the brothel, the restaurant, the stadium).

The economics are flagged up more than once simply in hard-cash calculations: Antonio has pawned the bike to pay for food before the film begins; and now Maria sacrifices their bedlinen (for 7500 lire; the clerk counts out the notes) to redeem the bike (for 6100 lire, including one month's interest at 20 per cent) and let Antonio re-enter the world of labour. There is a symbolic exchange here also, of course: the lost linen betokens comfort but also the marital bed, the wedding contract and wedding gifts, all sacrificed, symbolically, for the bike and for the wage it will make possible. The calculation is unforgiving, hard, like the bitter kick Maria gives her wash-bucket as she makes it. Antonio, too, does his sums in the film: first, brightly, with Maria (shortly before chiding her for wasting money on La Santona) and later with Bruno at the restaurant, when he counts up his wages, his overtime, his bonuses, to a total 24,000 lire/month.

Of course, the whole scene in the restaurant is a foolish miscalculation on Antonio's part: he looks nervously into his wallet before entering, presumably at some of that 1400 lire that he has left over from the pawnbroker's.

Once stolen, the bicycle enters another economic order. Bartolini's novel was intensely interested in the dark workings of the black market and all the louche figures and deals within it, and the film follows up on this. There, the bike is no longer a single unit of value, let alone a source of organic labour: it is broken up, split into parts, stripped, recombined, fenced and sold (like a parody of an industrial production line). Quite another sort of labour is involved here and other forms of exchange (including bribes, threats of violence, such as Antonio tries on the old tramp in church, but with little confidence – he does not understand the rules here). And the sites and networks of this black economy are different also, between the confusing rituals and relations at the markets and the seedy world of Alfredo, his decoys and helpers, his (unexplained) pay-off to the tramp, his links to the local brothel (with its own very particular – at the time legalised – exchange of money for sex), and the milling street community at Vicolo della Campanella. Within this shady underworld, in a sort of alchemy, the bicycle disappears and it threatens to swallow up Antonio also.

The bicycle, then, has a lot to tell us about *Bicycle Thieves*. Most importantly, it provides a model for the working of the film as narrative, by teasing out complex internal patterns and external associations from behind a veneer of concrete simplicity. The same model is to be found across an elaborate (and decidedly 'un-neorealistic') web of narrative, visual and aural patterning in the film, working at the level of genre and narrative mode, structures of time and space, and networks of motifs.[32]

There are at least four narrative modes or archetypes interwoven over the course of *Bicycle Thieves*. Framing the story are two scenes that flag up a certain kind of realist narrative of type:

at the start, Antonio Ricci – with his Everyman, 'John-Smith'-style name – emerges as if at random from the crowd of Val Melaina's (Rome's, Italy's) unemployed, called to life with the opening word of the film; at the end, insulted and humiliated, but redeemed by Bruno's hand, he disappears back again into the mass of working-class men (the football crowd). This is high realism, of the kind championed by Marxist critic Georg Lukács, in which an individual story emerges from and stands for the larger, material condition of a class. Other life stories (Alfredo's, for example, but millions of others also) would be just as compelling, determined by material poverty and a hostile environment, and filled with human suffering: this story is but one of many (that dialectic again).

Within this high-realist frame, however, the film taps into a series of quite different genres or modes, which echo either classical Hollywood or Biblical allegory (or both). The first arc of the film (approximately eighteen minutes) moves through a 'comic', upward trajectory of romance and resolution, a narrative of Antonio's reintegration into the institutions of family and work. A problem is posed by a new situation (a job, but no bike) and is overcome at a cost (pawning the sheets) that draws husband and wife together, leading to happiness (Antonio and Maria together in the city, on their bike or laughing and playful; see p. 48), family unity (Bruno admiring the bike and his father) and integration (Antonio part of a happy army of municipal workers).

The theft shatters the romance, and reveals that opening mini-narrative as illusory, ironic, casting the scale of the problem onto a new level (in narrative and in sociological terms). Of course, we were not wholly unprepared for this: as noted, we have been waiting for a theft of a bike and a sense of inevitable loss tinges the comedy with a knowingly tragic dimension: the mood is both 'comic' and upbeat, and anxious, suspenseful.

If we jump forward to the final sequence of the film, we find a narrative of the fall, or rather the Fall, of transgression and exile: the collapse of the search, the collapse of Antonio's moral compass

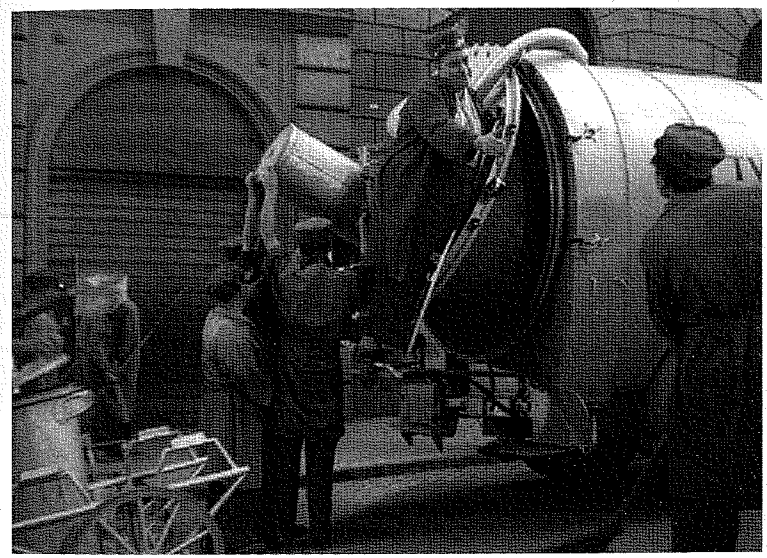
('Thou shalt not steal') and dignity, in the face of his son, a mirror of his innocent self and of hope. This Fall is also that collapse of distinction, noted earlier. He is now no different from Alfredo (both thieves: hence, we now learn, the plural *Thieves* of the title); any bicycle (the plural *biciclette* of the title, not rendered in the English) is now the object of his desperate grabbing, not *his* bicycle, his intimate property. And in case there were doubts about using Biblical commandments and the language of exile to read Antonio's humble story, we should remember another story of two thieves; the two thieves crucified alongside Christ, one of them saved and one of them damned (according to one Gospel), and all the allegorical weight they bear in narratives of the downtrodden.[33] The Fall and exile narratives in this sequence, finally, coincide with and run contrary to another archetype, that of Bruno's *Bildung*, his rite of passage into adulthood, as the Fall of the father equates to the rise of the son, inverting their relation of dependency.[34]

We have, then, a realist 'typical' frame narrative, a comedy-romance opening (tinged with tragic expectations) and a 'Fall' narrative – with mini-*Bildungsroman* – to close. This quite complex cluster leaves a gaping hole left to fill: the genre that occupies the larger part of the film (around an hour of screen time): the quest. This long segment of the film dilates, all but swamping the rest, but it is, in reality, only a delaying mechanism between the second and third pivotal crises of the film (the loss of the bike and the loss of any chance of finding the bike). The power of quest narratives has always lain in this deferment of resolution; it was invented in ancient traditions as a container to allow narrative cycles to be stretched and sustained potentially *ad infinitum* and to tell in between stories of theology, nationhood, war and history (Grail cycles, the Odyssey). As a result, it has always been in part about itself as narrative (How will the story be sustained? What will our hero encounter next? How will he overcome the obstacle? Will it ever end?); and in part about the grander searches that constitute life itself. Antonio's persistence in his search means that, although he fails, he runs the gamut of ways of looking, of searching. He chases, walks, runs, waits, looks, listens, circles; he appeals to authority (police, Party, Church), to support networks, family and friends; he uses logic, imagines the mind of the thief, follows indirect paths (the old man); he cajoles, forces, fights, shouts ('Stop thief!') and talks his way towards his object (the over-long sequence in the church follows Antonio as he tries every tack he can); he even, desperately, tries the supernatural, what he describes to Maria earlier on as 'this rubbish, this con-trick, this nonsense'. Finally, of course, he tries theft, to come to some sort of resolution. The gamut being run, here and in all quest narratives perhaps, is not merely of strategies to find a missing object; it is rather the gamut of the means we have – to put it at its most grandiose – for knowing about and taming the world.

A further mode or genre is at play in *Bicycle Thieves*, for the most part emerging at moments of digression or inattention to the linear, if meandering progress of the main plotline. Digressions can be read – and have been frequently, in regard to this film – as markers of

realism, of film imitating the unstructured shape of lived lives. Thus, to give one much-cited example, when Bruno and Antonio get off the tram at Piazza Vittorio, they drift first to our right, showing us teams of street-sweepers in the background, then to our left, moving towards Baiocco's lorries and they then actually disappear behind one, seeming to give us a brief raw view of reality without narrative.[35] But far more consistently, the digressions in *Bicycle Thieves* are tonal digressions more than studies in real time; in particular, they are often intervals of comedy, of broad, popular, even slapstick comedy or music-hall play. As we saw above, both De Sica and Zavattini had strong veins of comedy running through their careers and cultural formations. In fact, many so-called neorealist works are, perhaps surprisingly, peppered with moments of broad-brush comedy. A notable example is the Fellini-scripted moment in *Rome Open City* when Aldo Fabrizi's priest bashes an old man on the head with a saucepan (for his own good, of course). *Bicycle Thieves* may even contain a hint of an homage to that moment, when Bruno is slapped on the head by a priest, when he (Bruno) opens a curtain to a confessional booth in church.[36]

The priest's slap belongs with a quite extensive list of comic turns in *Bicycle Thieves*. There's the variety show (advertised as 'Roma Bella' in a poster on the wall), with its jokey song-and-dance routine being rehearsed in the *casa del popolo* basement by Baiocco, Meniconi and friends; and, later, a three-man band in the restaurant plays the bawdy Neapolitan song 'Tammurriata nera' (literally, 'Black Drumming Song'), as the caricatured figure of the spoilt young rich boy is seen stringing out his molten mozzarella. The rotund Baiocco himself, especially alongside his diminutive companion Bagonghi, evokes traditions of fat-man/thin-man double acts, and Bagonghi exchanges clownish noises with a trader at Piazza Vittorio. In the dialogue, written from the outset in broad Roman-inflected Italian (a variety long associated with comedy in Italian film), there are moments of pure comedy: for example, at Porta Portese, two of the stall-holders shout in the rain, 'What, are you afraid of a bit of rain?'; 'No, I just don't want to get my hat and tails wet!'. A vein of



silent-film comedy (to say nothing of the more profound links between *Bicycle Thieves* and Chaplin, in particular *The Kid*, 1921) is hinted at in scenes where Antonio carries his bike into the poster warehouse on his shoulder, looking as though a turn here or there will send someone tumbling over; or when he crinkles his poster as he pastes it on the wall; or during the Keystone-Kops-style chase around the church. Then there are the boys playing the accordion, back-kicked nonchalantly by Antonio's bill-posting colleague; and the funny German-speaking priests. Finally, there's the moment that got the film into such trouble with Joe Breen in America, when Bruno starts to pee against a wall, only to stop halfway, with an exaggeratedly startled jump, when his father upbraids him.[37]

These comic variations often display a vein of theatricality and performance, and this holds also for the stagey scenes in La Santona's cluttered bedroom, where, in another apparent digression, the clairvoyant humiliates the mustachioed man, to great comic effect.[38] Here, the stock comedy is social and (unusually for this film) sexual – to do with ugliness, honour, maybe even impotence – and this suggests a function for these and other comic digressions which goes well beyond a need for tonal variety. Certainly, the message La Santona has for the ugly man is staged (through a brief, zooming reverse shot of Antonio) as a message for him too, about his search and, by analogy, about his own threatened masculinity: 'There's no use sowing in barren soil [. . .] you must sow in other fields.' The comic digressions use tonal variety, in other words, to disguise further probing and refracting of the film's central anxieties.

Besides narrative arcs which fit into archetypal patterns of one kind or another, or recurrent veins such as the comic substratum to the film, the hybrid shape of *Bicycle Thieves* also comes through in sequences or even single shots that gesture towards other film styles and use them to aid in the project of mapping a concrete social reality. This applies to two key expressionist sequences of syncopated editing and anxiety, one at Piazza Vittorio and the other at the stadium, where close-ups and angled shots of Antonio interweave

with shifting framings of bicycle parts, in a disorienting mix of close-ups, medium and long shots, back and forth in a crescendo of tension (over seventy edits during the stadium sequence); or to the two hoods looming over Antonio in Vicolo della Campanella like visitors from a gangster movie. These are not (or not only) intertextual games, so much as shorthand for the fears and dangers brought by the contradictions and risks of living a hair's breadth away from hunger. Much of the film's stylistic hybridity merits re-reading in this vein.

The panoply of narrative modes, generic and stylistic nods in *Bicycle Thieves* offers one way of segmenting and analysing the complex shapes of meaning configured in the film's narrative. Other dynamics of meaning play out at the level of temporal and spatial form. To take just one example, the time structure of the story can be segmented according to its three days' duration, Friday (from morning to the middle of the day; approximately thirteen minutes of screentime); Saturday (from 6.30am to evening; lasting fifteen

minutes) and Sunday (from dawn to late afternoon; covered in fifty-six minutes). It is hard not to think, immediately, of Biblical and literary allusions, to the Crucifixion on Friday and Resurrection on Sunday (if anything *Bicycle Thieves* inverts this model); or to Dante's *Inferno*, also traversed between Friday and Sunday.

The days also divide up in more prosaic, but nevertheless telling ways: Antonio's labour varies by the day, for example. On Friday he is unemployed; on Saturday he starts work, but soon loses his way; and on Sunday, the day of rest, he is worn down by intensive and unproductive labour (the search). Certain times of each day also resonate to help us to fit the story into a pattern of lived lives. On Friday, Antonio's disaffected inactivity contrasts with the early-morning business of Maria at the water-pipe: he is out of sync with time and out of place. On his two 'work' days, by contrast, we see him at dawn, galvanised and active, heading off into or arriving early in the city centre. Sunday is dilated not only in screentime, but also in the time-related stages it goes through. During Sunday morning, we dwell at length at the charity Mass; and in the afternoon, we encounter the traditional Sunday football match. In between, Antonio and Bruno come across Sunday lunch too, staged fully three times and in three startlingly different ways: at church, a soup-kitchen lunch for the poor; at the restaurant, a self-satisfied feast for the moneyed, middle-class family; and at the brothel, a lazy lunch-break for the girls and their madam. Church, Sunday lunch, the match: together, these make up almost a stereotypical Italian Sunday (perhaps the restaurant and the brothel too); but the film varies and complicates each facet of the stereotype, making these settled rituals strange in the context of Antonio and Bruno's increasingly troubled quest.

The days, finally, segment in terms of movement: we will see later the potent role played in the film by transport (starting, once again, with bicycles) and by highly choreographed movement through the city's spaces, but we can usefully note here Pierre Sorlin's telling point that on each of the three days of the film, Antonio

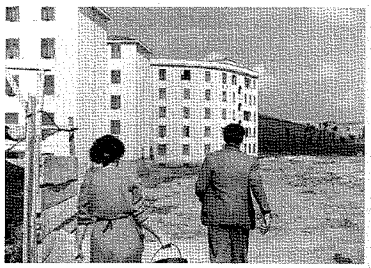
emblematically enters the city centre from the marginalised periphery of Val Melaina once.[39] Each time the film shows us this in different ways, with different durations and elisions, because each moment of re-entry redefines Antonio's relationship with the city space, with work, family, community and the future. On Friday, the film elides the journey into the centre dissolving from the pawnbroker's (problem solved) to find him at the municipal offices ready, with bike on shoulder, to take up his new job. On Saturday, we follow his journey from home into the city on his bike, racing buses and trams, exuding celebratory joy at the effort, as his labour (his pedalling away) marks a conquest of the city and a rejoining of the labour force.[40] On Sunday, the journey is all but elided again, with no image of home: Antonio and Bruno get off the tram at Piazza Vittorio, as the market begins to set up, and are immediately disoriented, stranded in an unknown (black-market) city.

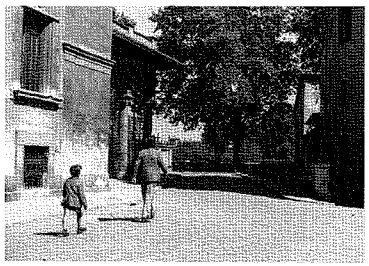
A final layer to add to the formal aspects of narrative and structure touched on so far is one containing all the myriad microscopic motifs, patterns and repetitions that permeate *Bicycle Thieves*, creating eddies of internal cross-referencing, sending messages of recognition to the viewer, and tying the film together into a complex formal and experiential web.

Take, for example, the two scenes at La Santona's, one initiated by Maria, the other by Antonio; one to thank her for finding Antonio a job, the other to get her help in recovering the bike and the job. The two scenes follow closely parallel sequences – both show the stairway, the anteroom and the queue in the bedroom, although only the second penetrates fully into that strange world; both are set alongside a street sequence in Via della Paglia, the first showing boys playing at stones as Maria goes up (are they thieves, we ask?), the second revealing the real thief, as Antonio and Bruno come down into the street. This latter aspect inserts into a longer patterned sequence of thieves and thefts, potential or real: from other premonitions of the theft of the bicycle (the accordion player in Via Pinciana), to the thefts themselves (by Alfredo; by Antonio), via the

many thieves and fences at Piazza Vittorio and Porta Portese, including the old vagrant, and the 'den of thieves' in Vicolo della Campanella. The figure of the thief, in other words, becomes emblematic of all the people struggling to inhabit this world, to make ends meet, in one way or another, licit or illicit; and perhaps strengthens further the echoes of the Biblical allegory of the two thieves on the cross beside Christ (was one of them saved?).

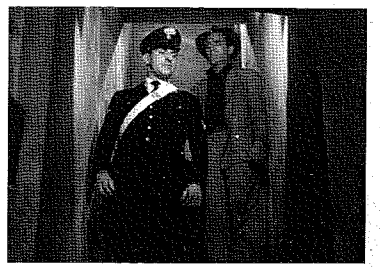
A more localised motif, emerging gradually in the later segments of the film, is the Roma–Modena football match, first flagged up in a background voice from the radio 'Sporting News' at La Santona's; then flashing briefly centre-stage when a truck of Modena fans in army uniform drives by as Antonio and Bruno stand exhausted on the banks of the Tiber (Antonio asks Bruno as a conciliatory, father-to-son gesture, if Modena are any good); and, finally, emerging as the noisy, crowded counterpoint for Antonio's Fall. The football match pins down the time of the narrative (Sunday afternoon), links the search for a bike, for work, for dignity, to a leisure activity, one of the great mass-participation, working-class leisure activities in modern Italy. It sets Antonio's search against the money, the wage needed to afford a ticket to the match; and evokes more general 'sporting' metaphors for the life struggle that he is engaged in, metaphors



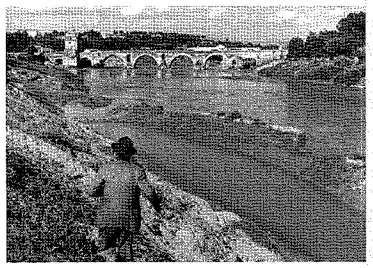


of life and survival as a combination of luck and force (fortune and virtue, as Machiavelli put it), a game of winners and losers. Further, the stadium crowd, also evokes images of community and shared loyalty, denied to Antonio (with echoes, perhaps, of Fascist mass athletic gatherings in the stadia and town squares of pre-war Italy).

Even simple repetitions or variations – of dialogue, events or images – serve to underline plotpoints or character traits. So, as we have seen, Antonio first tells Maria about his salary, then later Bruno. When he first tells Maria of his dilemma, he strides ahead, caught up



in his anxiety, leaving Maria to struggle with two pails of water; later, his driven search will see him, again and again, leave Bruno behind to fall over or to nearly be run over by cars without his noticing (p. 56). Bruno, meanwhile, on two occasions – at Piazza Vittorio and Vicolo della Campanella – sees his father heading for trouble and sneaks off to call a policeman but, in each case, it turns out that the policeman cannot help, beyond calming the situation down. (There is a series of other policemen in the film; at the police station, at La Santona's, mentioned by Maria ('You look like a policeman') or at the brothel

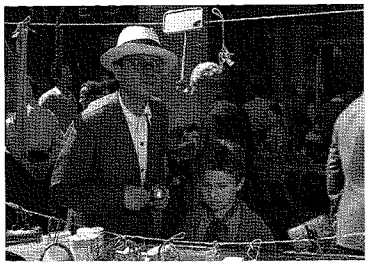


('What would the Commissioner say?'): quite a complicated picture of the film's relation to the Law emerges as a result).[41]

The network of recurrent or overdetermined presences continues on a still smaller scale. Simple objects or Gestalt shapes populate the *mise en scène* in surprisingly dense ways (see pp. 57–8): bicycles, first of all; but also eating, drinking and cooking; stairways (the Riccis, La Santona and Alfredo all live on the first floor; see also p. 38); crosses and religious icons (in Antonio and Maria's home, in church, at La Santona's, in Alfredo's home etc., often set alongside icons of popular culture, such as film stars or sportsmen, or family portraits; the river Tiber, its banks, bridges and their various architectonic styles, which set a riverside stage for a series of key transitional scenes (the pursuit of the tramp, the near-drowning of a boy, Antonio and Bruno's exhausted reconciliation; the many geometrical, spatial patterns and textures of Roman streets, walls, gates, churches and monuments that we traverse during Antonio's wanderings; the film posters (not only Rita Hayworth as Gilda, but

the cornucopia of posters on the streets or at the warehouse (see p. 38),[42] or the postcards of stars on sale at the Piazza Vittorio market (see p. 59), or the images of Clark Gable and others on the wall of the brothel or near Alfredo's bedside). Even hats have a strangely potent role to play, in particular Antonio's hats, from his work cap to his weather-beaten fedora, whose tumble to the ground, dirty and muddied at the end, marks a low point in his humiliation, only to be salvaged by Bruno who dusts it off as his tears flow. Then there is the prissy sunhat worn by the predatory man who accosts and teases Bruno at Piazza Vittorio. Alfredo's hat is the key piece of evidence Antonio has to identify him and a key historical marker, also: it is a German army hat, a residue of the chaos and danger of the Nazi occupation of Rome, as well as of the black market in army supplies that it produced. (As noted earlier, the man who first fetches Antonio at Val Melaina is wearing an Italian army hat.) This is just one of the ways that the legacy of Fascism and war, which lies as the unspoken pretext and root cause of so many of the problems in *Bicycle Thieves* and in postwar Italy, is coded into the film.

There is a mass of detail in all this, all of it actively contributing to an extraordinary narrative and descriptive density in *Bicycle Thieves*. One principle seems to govern it all: the constant, textured interplay of



internal layers of story, structure, image, sound and meaning and the simultaneous existence of all of these at a level of feather-light simplicity and resonant complexity (as with the bicycle). Each layer has its local function but is also part of a concerted, orchestral effect mapped out over the entire film; each seems to gloss the other, reworking them in different moods and keys, creating patterns of repetition and refraction. This is not, however, a pure formalism, but one wholly dedicated to making possible, for the film and for the viewer, that thick description of this world that is its ultimate aim, opening up the space or the depths from which a viewer's sense of recognition and of emotional engagement with the story and with the world might flow.

5 Cities

Bicycle Thieves is one of the great city films, worthy to stand in line with *Man with a Movie Camera* (Dziga Vertov, 1929) or *Mean Streets* (Martin Scorsese, 1973), *Metropolis* (Fritz Lang, 1927) or *City of God* (Fernando Meirelles, 2002), a tradition that ties the medium of cinema to modern urban space, both real and imaginary, in some deep, indissoluble bond. When the city in question is Rome, however, the city–cinema bond takes on a very particular inflexion. Rome-on-film is, inevitably, layered into a panoply of images and sites, histories and representations of Rome as Empire, as seat of the Papacy and the Renaissance, and (for Italians especially) as capital of the new Italian nation, from 1870 and on into its Fascist phase. Floating above all of these is the image of Rome as a site of origin of European culture, religion and power, as a central node (with Athens and Jerusalem) in a millennial history. To paint any picture of Rome – in whatever medium – is to aim high, culturally speaking; to address the city and the world, *urbi et orbi*.

Rome's history is not only imbricated into the stonework and cityscape; it also has its visual traditions. This is one of the most 'looked at' cities in Western culture. And cinema too, as it emerged at the end of the 19th century, drew on earlier ways of seeing the Rome of the Grand Tour and early tourism.[43] In early cinema, Italy established a reputation for epic Ancient Roman productions, such as *Quo vadis?* (Enrico Guazzoni, 1912) or *Cabiria* (Giovanni Pastrone, 1914) and, to a degree, this 'Roman' tradition survived both the post-Great War collapse of the local film industry and the rise of Fascism. The Ancient Roman epic would return with a vengeance in the early 1950s, when Hollywood planted its flag in Rome for a glamorous decade, starting with a new *Quo vadis?* (Mervyn LeRoy, 1951), peaking with *Ben-Hur* (William Wyler, 1959) and collapsing under

the considerable weight of the Burton–Taylor *Cleopatra* (Joseph Mankiewicz, 1963). 'Hollywood on the Tiber', as it was known, would also throw up its glittering, if paper-thin fantasies of contemporary Rome, starting with *Roman Holiday* (William Wyler, 1953).

Rome in neorealism arrived during an interlude in these fantasy-film representations of Rome, declaring by omission and inversion of perspective its intent to reinvent the city, to reappropriate it. Thus, it largely ignored the Rome of monuments and historic sites, of tourist or 'high'-cultural recognition, in favour of a more contemporary, 'real' city, charting the struggle of the working-class urban poor.

This binary picture is worth complicating a little, however. The city in *Bicycle Thieves* comes at us in a layered spectrum, from 'low' and documentarist, through to the mythical or archetypal city, evoked as crowd, labyrinth, a site of loss and danger, as a fragmented and confusing space traversed by spatial and social tensions. Within that spectrum, there is also a densely historicised city, with fragments of its monumental history visible, if only in the stones and architectonics of the spaces traversed, spaces that contain and contribute to Antonio's calvary. This other Rome is, in some ways, simply a new Rome, showing the signs and strains of the layering of a modern city onto an ancient and over-imagined palimpsest. As we have suggested already, the Rome in *Bicycle Thieves* is a city in transition, looking back to its past, perhaps particularly to its recent Fascist past and to the war; and forward to its glib, glamorous and messy modernity that would explode with the economic boom of the 1950s, and enter the visual vocabulary of world cinema with Fellini's *La dolce vita* (1960).

The film gives us another Rome in a different sense also, one which cuts across the linear trajectory of time's arrow. We are also being guided through a hidden Rome, a quotidian, working (and working-class) Rome that has in many respects been part of the texture of the city throughout its millennial history, operating and adapting below the radar of representation. Not for nothing are we

shown the city's poor emblematically split between the peripheral, unfinished, modern 'ghetto' of Val Melaina and the narrow, often empty, medieval streets of the working-class Trastevere and Ponte districts, hugging either side of the Tiber in the city's heart. In both Ancient Rome and modern Rome, the poor are hidden.

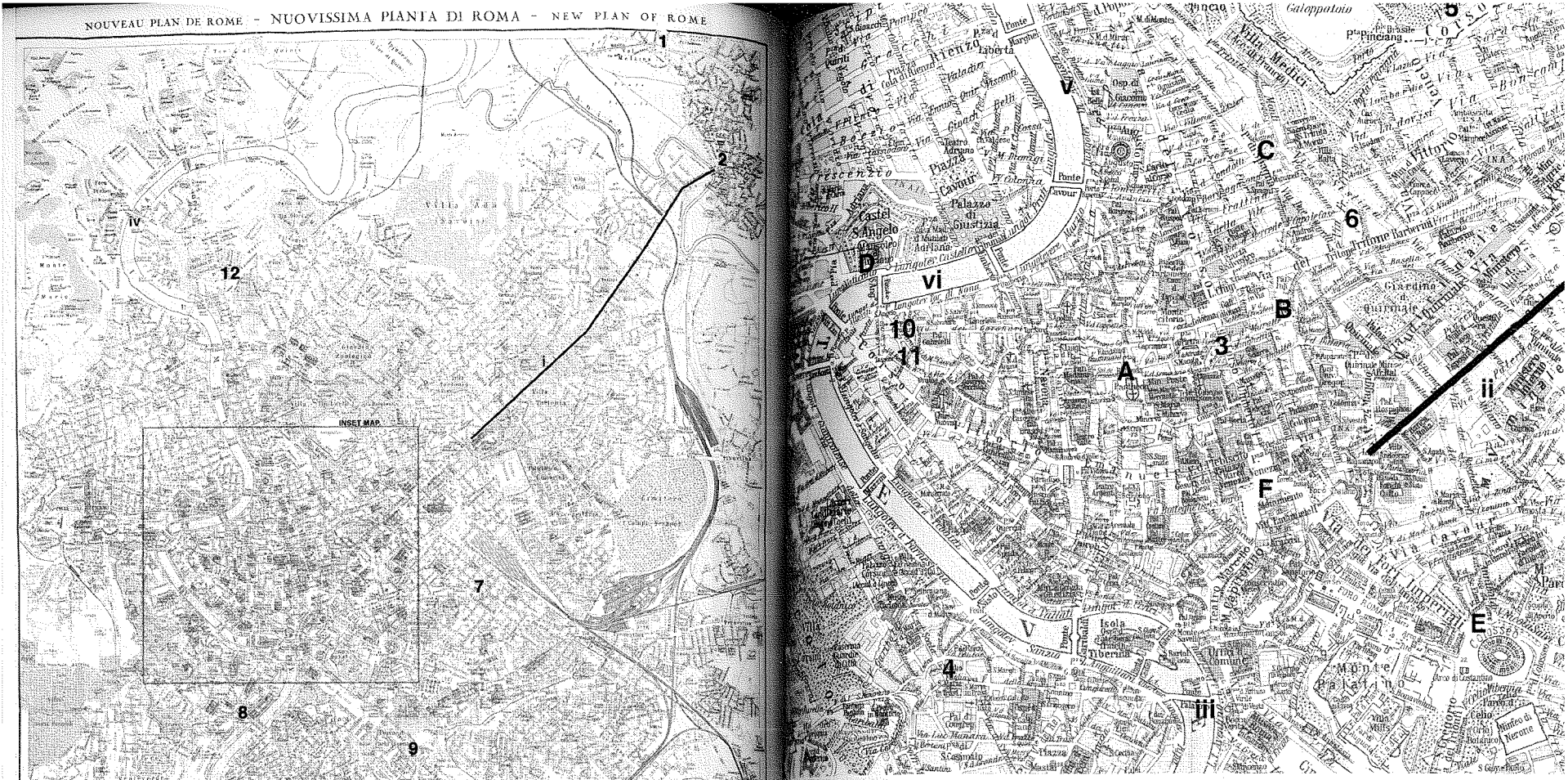
There is, in other words, a great deal more going on in the portrayal of Rome in *Bicycle Thieves* than a camera being placed on a street corner watching city life go by or a random act of *pedinamento*, following a stranger around (two of Zavattini's famous formulae for the neorealist ideal).[44] There is an articulated and extensive city space, layered in time, mapped and navigated as geographical space, thanks to the film's constant moving flow; and then carefully constructed as a network of social spaces, where different social practices and networks are played out and from which the texture of lived lives – Antonio's, Bruno's, Maria's – are woven.

As Franco Moretti has shown in his study of the cartography of novels, there is much to be gleaned from mapping patterns of location and movement in narratives rooted in socially and historically specific sites (e.g. Dickens's London, Balzac's Paris).[45] Of course, like all fictions, *Bicycle Thieves* elides real geographies on occasion: for example, it splices together Via della Paglia in Trastevere and Via di Panico across the river in the Ponte district, as if one abutted the other; or it jumps around between various disjointed locations in its riverside sequences. In fact, both examples, although in part no doubt a result of shooting schedules or site availability, are quite telling in narrative terms: the first shows a desire to link causally and almost mystically La Santona to the discovery of the thief, as well as, perhaps, to link two of the 'feminine' or 'matriarchal' sites in the film, La Santona's place and the brothel; the other suggests that the river should be treated, in all its manifestations in the film, as a single, distinct space, one of transition and uncertainty, of danger (a boy nearly drowns there), but also discovery (Antonio and Bruno catch up with the tramp on a bridge), in other words a figure of the flow

(Kracauer's flow of life) that characterises the entire film.[46] For the most part, however, De Sica and Zavattini worked extremely hard to trace the exact contours of the real city, to project narrative and meaning onto spatial and social reality.

There are twelve key city locations in the film (shown on the maps on pp. 66–7 (nos 1–12)). The film inhabits these locations but also spends time travelling between them. Two of these sequences take us along major city arteries (maps i–vi): Via Nomentana, the radial Roman road leading north-east out of the city from Porta Pia (i); and the central Via Nazionale, during the journey from Piazza Vittorio to Porta Portese in Meniconi's lorry (ii); (we get a rare glimpse of a monument here, the Vittoriano monument to the Unknown Soldier, at the heart of the city by the Capitoline Hill; see p. 68 top); and we should perhaps cite the river again here, as a dormant city artery (iii–vi). This leaves only two fully unlocated scenes, both interiors, whether location- or studio-shot: the pawnbroker's and the police station.[47]

Certain features of the maps stand out immediately: first the seven-kilometre abyss between periphery (1, 2) and centre, whether that means the busy prosperous city centre (3, 6, 12), the seedier and rowdier market squares (7, 8), or the quiet backstreets of old, working-class Rome (4, 10, 11). Pierre Sorlin's analysis of the three days of the story, each containing a visit to the centre from the periphery, comes to mind again here, along with the very concrete sociological reality of travelling such a distance to reach the jobs and opportunities, and the social networks and institutions that the centre has to offer. The inhabitants of Val Melaina are in exile. But where does the city start and end in this mapping of it? If Val Melaina is clearly beyond the *urbs*, with open land between there and the start of the built environment, there are several entry points and endpoints to the city also, in particular marked by the city gates. These openings in the 3rd-century AD Aurelian walls (or their later replacements) play a striking role in the film. At Porta Pia to the north-east, Antonio enters the city in triumph, on his bike on the Saturday, the same Porta Pia



Map of Rome and detail, 1950 (Enrico Verdesi Editore, modified)

Key Locations

1. Val Melaina (the Riccis' home)
2. Piazza Sempione (Bruno's workplace)
3. Via Montecatini (the poster warehouse)
4. Via della Paglia (La Santona's)
5. Via Pinciana (Antonio's lesson in bill-posting)
6. Via Francesco Crispi, near Largo Tritone (the theft)
7. Piazza Vittorio (market)
8. Porta Portese (market and surrounding area)
9. Church of Saints Nereo e Achille (the Mass for the poor)
10. Via di Panico (the brothel)
11. Vicolo della Campanella (the thief's home)
12. Stadio Nazionale (the final scene)

Hidden Monuments

A Pantheon
B Trevi Fountain
C Spanish Steps
D Castel Sant'Angelo
E Coliseum
F Vittoriano Monument and Capitoline Hill (glimpsed from Meniconi's lorry)

Key Arteries

i Via Nomentana, starting at Porta Pia
ii Via Nazionale
iii–vi Key sites along the River Tiber seen in the film

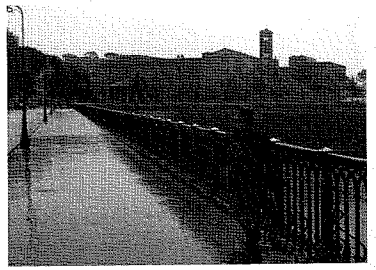
triumphantly breached by the army of the new Italy in 1870, when Rome was taken from the Papacy to become its capital, scene of the first ever Italian fiction film, *La presa di Roma* (F. Alberini, 1905) (we see the monument to this national victory to Antonio's left as he passes; p. 68 bottom). But Antonio will exit Porta Pia again later that day, humiliated and on foot. In between, his fate is also symbolically split by another city gate: he learns his new trade on Via Pinciana, just outside Porta Pinciana seen in the background (see p. 38); and he loses his future in Via Crispi, which is a continuation of the same road only a few hundred metres the other side of that gate. Porta Portese is another gate Antonio crosses through, symbolically: the thief rides off through it and Antonio pursues flailingly, before retreating to try another (also unfruitful) direction. This sequence at Porta Portese is important also for what it shows us on the other side of the gate: unbuilt wasteland, as if without history or social inflexion, space waiting to be filled (like the open land between the city and Val Melaina;

or the pre-urban, semi-rural river scene where boys play in the Tiber). In the far background looking south-east beyond Porta Portese, however, is an icon of yet another unknown Rome, early industrial Rome, in the form of the circular gas tower, the 'Gazometro', built in the early years of the 20th century to serve the city port across the river in the Ostiense district (p. 69). The gates mark the city's growth and change, then, as much as they do Antonio's own real and symbolic transitions and losses, and they show that there is not just one binary pairing of centre and periphery, but that webs of centres and peripheries spread across the map in irregular ways.

Even if we limit ourselves to the central locations alone, the layered nature of the city soon becomes apparent. The map (on p. 67) includes, alongside the key central locations in *Bicycle Thieves*, some of the best-known tourist sites in Rome. The point here is to show how intimately close and yet entirely cut off from each other these two spheres are. A similar point emerges if we gauge the population of different locations: there is a careful rhythmic interplay between crowded, bustling (modern) Rome, and a deserted, soporific (Sunday, old, working-class) Rome, often a corner away. This alternation of crowds and silence has, of course, psychological as well as sociological import, breeding confusion and anxiety. The city is a labyrinth, a site of unreadability and hopeless searching, in both its modern and old-world configurations.

The list of twelve locations points to a clear bias in favour of public, 'civic' spaces, spaces of social and economic exchange and negotiation. Even when interiors are used, they are almost always established and located externally and therefore socially, before the camera and the characters penetrate them. Thus, we see and hear streets, squares or open spaces in every single one of the twelve locations, and exteriors only in seven of the twelve. The nature of those public spaces varies also, spatially and thus also in the kind of social practices and networks established there. Only Piazza Vittorio is, notionally, shaped like a traditional city square – rectangular, regular, surrounded by porticoes – but the framing and editing of the

sequence is more about the fragmentation and accumulation of confusing detail (and about hidden, perhaps criminal practices, going on in public places). Another formally regular, but far from pacific, open space is the Largo Tritone, the star-cluster of roads towards which the thief rides off on Antonio's bike (see p. 39). Six roads converge at this crystallisation of the bustle of modern, commercial Rome: cars, buses, taxis, pedestrians, bikes move across the space in irregular lines; there are banks, offices, shops, kiosks.[48] The converging roads include the ominously dark tunnel – the 'Traforo' – into which Antonio is diverted: again, this open space is threatening and opaque and moving at a rhythm that is disorienting. Largo Tritone is a place of transit and movement, a hub rather than a forum of civic or social exchange; and the same could be said of Bruno's garage workplace on Piazza Sempione or the space in front of the stadium. Even the space around Porta Portese, which fills up with irregular, snaking lines of market stalls, and so with the business of human and economic negotiation, is spatially confusing. It spills over



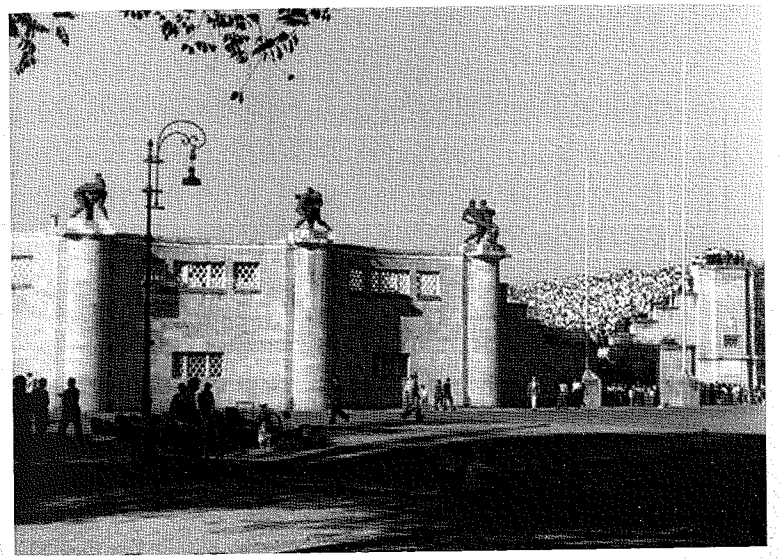
both sides of the city walls, petering out into wasteland in one direction and in another into the theatrical labyrinth of streets and squares where Antonio and Bruno look for the old tramp, before accosting him on the Palatino bridge. The narrative and filming meshes in with the geometry of the spaces in the Porta Portese sequence, beginning in the disorienting rain shower, and then building the sequence around lines and shapes – the arch of the gate in the wall, the diagonal lines of the bridge, the web of lines in the deserted backstreets – to intensify this search-within-a-search (p. 71). Finally, there is Val Melaina with its inverted piazza form (vast housing block in the middle, open space all around) and its degraded, unfinished 'civic' spaces, paths and roads: the inhabitants are forced into the open, the women to get running water, the men to pass days of inactivity, the children to play on scrubland (Antonio and Maria cross paths with a gang of children pretending to be in a wedding cortège).

If the civic spaces that dominate the film are often irregular and confusing, something similar can be said about the movement between interior and exterior spaces. Thresholds are sites of decision, often of danger or uncertainty for Antonio. He hovers in the doorway of La Santona's building while Maria goes up; he delays at the door to the restaurant; he is bad at negotiating his way onto trams; awkward in his entry into the poster warehouse; hesitant and dependent on Maria as he returns even to his own home.

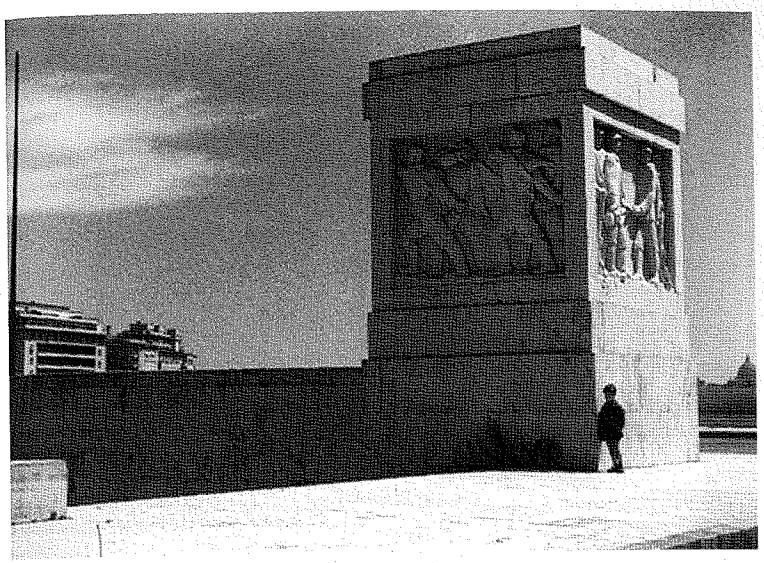
The brief view of the 'Gazometro' reminds us that the city sites in *Bicycle Thieves* carry powerful historical connotations as well as socio-geographical ones (and the former feed into the politics of the latter). This is particularly and intensely the case for the film's vision of Fascist Rome, scene of the city's most recent radical transformation and token of dictatorship, war and occupation, which is worth dwelling on briefly. There are three key Fascist architectural sites in the film: Val Melaina, the bridge where Antonio fears Bruno is drowned (Ponte Duca D'Aosta) and the National Football Stadium. In keeping with the film's treatment of other historic icons of the

cityscape, they are deliberately neither the best known nor the most grandiose of the Fascist transformations of Rome.

To take them in order of their construction, the stadium, originally the Stadium of the National Fascist Party (PNF), was built on the site of a former arena in 1927, part of a massive construction programme of arenas for the mass gatherings and athletic glorification of the Fascist regime.[49] Its moment of greatest glory came on 10 June 1934, when, with Mussolini proudly in attendance, Italy won the football World Cup final there, against Czechoslovakia and the sporting glory of the Fascist nation was declared to the world. Antonio's dramatic Fall in sight of its glorifying, classicising gymnastic statuary is a climactic situational irony of the film, capturing visually the legacy of Fascism. The rhetoric of strength, the body of the Fascist New Man, and the adoring masses of the *adunate* (rallies) are marked as the historical and collective-psychological root-cause of Antonio's crisis and all it stands for.



Val Melaina was one of the so-called *borgate*, the new outlying areas of housing built to accommodate the mostly poor inhabitants of close-knit central areas of Rome destroyed (in Italian *sventrati*, disembowelled) to make way for Mussolini's vast avenues around the Coliseum, St Peter's and the mausoleum of Augustus (and, in the process, to keep workers and their potential opposition to Fascism out of harm's way).[50] (Perhaps Antonio came from precisely the central backstreets and communities which now confound him, proof of the success of Mussolini's social engineering.) Val Melaina was completed in 1933, and consisted of a massive, seven-storey, modern block surrounded by open land, with few services or connections to the city. Its inhabitants later nicknamed it 'Stalingrad' (see below and p. 56).[51] Nearby were other *borgate* at Tufello or the 'garden city' of Monte Sacro. Val Melaina was near the railway and an airfield and so was a target for Allied bombing during the war. By 1948, we can see that it still has something of its gleaming 1930s' modernity seen from afar in the



sunlight, but close up it is worn and run-down and still isolated and incomplete. From 1949, a concerted postwar housing programme – the so-called INA-casa programme – would begin transforming city peripheries such as this, as well as filling them in and tying them to the expanding urban fabric, another sign of Italy's modernisation and of the transitional moment *Bicycle Thieves* captures.

Finally, the Ponte Duca D'Aosta was designed by Vincenzo Fasolo and built in 1939, as a link to the Foro Italico area, another grand, sporting arena in the north of the city, with classical gymnastic statuary to match. The film uses the architecture of the bridge to mark a moment of extreme anxiety, of separation between Antonio and Bruno and, as with the stadium, of irony, as the heroic military reliefs of a Great War battle on the stone pillars are set against Antonio's own anti-heroic, doomed struggle (p. 75).

Mapreading – like the all-controlling Nazi Bergmann in *Rome Open City*, who famously explores Rome from his desk – provides one kind of knowledge of a city, a knowledge of distributions and systems. Navigating the city from below, on the ground, provides quite another kind, quite another texture to the urban fabric. *Bicycle Thieves* is permeated by this kind of texture, because it is constantly on the move within and between its locations, permeated by flow, by the choreography of individuals and crowds in space, by the social and psychological inflexion of city space through movement.

If the film is something of an anthology of the lived city, in its array of sites and spheres of Roman life, it is also something of an anthology of ways and means of getting around the city, of means of transport. This begins with the hundreds of bicycles that haunt the film and the streets, and all the meanings they bring with them, as we have seen. Of all the sequences that show bicycles moving around the city, the most energised, even euphoric is the Saturday morning ride, eighty seconds of film time from Val Melaina to Piazza Sempione (where Bruno gets off), across the Aniene along the Via Nomentana, through Porta Pia to Via Montecatini, at the geographical and historical centre

of the city (on the maps on pp. 66–7, from 1 to 2, along i, to 3). This ride is Antonio's (and the bicycle's) triumph, their conquest of the city, from abject periphery to centre. Cicognini's score contributes to the joyous harmony, and so does an elaborate choreography and geometry in the movement of Antonio, Bruno (as their bike leans at an angle into their journey) and the crowds of cyclists, buses and cars around them. Even the editing helps: the matching dissolves distil the journey into an easy sequence interweaving close-ups and character shots with different cityscapes – the shining new *borgate* in the deep background, the city gate, Via del Corso (see p. 77 and p. 68). Indeed, Eraldo Da Roma's persistent use of the dissolve throughout (there are ten major dissolves in the film) gives us a different sort of transition, a conjoining and intermingling of spaces or city sites, a fluid work of analogy that underscores the play of movement and repetition that runs through the film at so many levels.

Buses, trams, cars and lorries all play their part in conveying the sense of navigating the city. There are buses and trams (and

lorries used as buses, as they had been since the war years), ferrying people around from the very opening shot of the film as, under the credits, the camera tracks bus 207 drawing up at its last stop in Val Melaina; to the very last shots, when several buses and trams cut across the open space, through the crowd of fans, and a lorry nudges into the back of the humiliated Antonio, confirming the contempt in which the city now holds him. Indeed, Antonio's deepest humiliation, caused by the presence of Bruno at this scene, comes about because Bruno had missed the tram that he was supposed to take towards Monte Sacro. Earlier on in the film, this humiliation had been anticipated in the key image of Antonio, his bike and his pride as a worker gone, being shoved to the back of the long queue to get on a jam-packed tram at Porta Pia.

There is Baiocco's refuse truck, at Piazza Vittorio and carrying Antonio and Bruno across the city to Porta Portese. Baiocco hangs off the back of the truck, controlling his crew and the space around him (see foot of p. 51); and there is an interesting sense in which

Baiocco is in a doubly privileged position, as PCI or union man, but also as refuse collector, able to see the hidden, dirty, secret city and so (possibly) to help his comrade out. The taxi driver who tries to help Antonio catch the thief is another figure with a particular knowledge of the city ('the Knowledge', as London taxi drivers call it), but like Baiocco, he cannot help. Compare the helpful truck or taxi to the ominous high shot at the police station, looking down on the riot-police jeeps of the repressive 'Nucleo Celere' (p. 79).

Even horses have a role to play in the street life of the film. We noted earlier the image of the cart-horse eating outside the restaurant. There are also horse-drawn carriages trotting rich Romans or tourists across Antonio's path – mocking symbols of luxury, of freedom, money and time – both in the final scene and, as we saw, at the Pinciana gate as he is shown how to paste up his posters.

All this interest in mechanical transport is, in reality, however, little more than an elaborate counterpoint to the heavy dance of pedestrian movement in *Bicycle Thieves*. For as long as Antonio has his bike, we hardly see him walking at all. After it has been stolen, however, Antonio and Bruno constantly move about the city on foot, walking, running, walking, running, never still, one of the most relentless motifs of the film.[52] More than simply walking or running, indeed, he is often seen walking away, running on, running after, his movement always inflected towards the next, impossibly elusive goal. One illustration of this is the way he is so frequently framed from behind, in middle or long shot heading away from us (see examples on pp. 39, 56, 58, 68, 71, 74, 75). Another is represented by the line drawings his walking or running traces on the screen, often at oblique angles; and often in complex relation either to the choreographed movements of the crowd (gathering or dissolving, rushing by or cutting across) or, more closely, to the lines of Bruno's movement alongside him. For Antonio, this movement is deeply neurotic, a mark of his failure to read the city and to penetrate its hidden and illicit workings; but in following his

movements, the film gives a temporal and lived density to the spaces of the city, marking the film as an attentive piece of sociological and anthropological fieldwork (like the fieldwork Zavattini and friends had carried out during pre-production). And it is to the city as a social, communal space that we now turn.

6 Communities

The communal dimension in *Bicycle Thieves* lies somewhere in between the two contrasting poles that have dominated both formalist and realist readings of the film: the individual versus the crowd. Antonio is isolated from the crowd from the very first scene – the camera tracks across the sun-drenched gap that separates them and back again; we feel the distance – and, even with his son in tow, he is ever more alone and lost, as the film and his search drag on. Indeed, his isolation is exacerbated and defined by the crowds that constantly surround him, threaten him, or confuse him, just as much as it is by his moments of literal isolation within space and within the frame.

This emphasis on crowds pushes all sorts of buttons for both film and urban history. It raises links not only to other neorealists or to earlier realisms, but also to key precursors of *Bicycle Thieves* that link city and mass together, perhaps especially King Vidor's *The Crowd* (1928).[53] In *The Crowd*, the city crowd is a sea in which individuals are either drowned or saved, and there is an ideological dimension to this also that Vidor's film is acutely and ironically aware of: a version of the 'American Dream' is the democratic dream of the Individual, any individual, making it among the millions straining to do the same. Conversely, *Bicycle Thieves* is shadowed also – especially for an Italian film made shortly after the fall of Fascism – by the anti-individualistic psychologies and philosophies of the crowd of Gustave Le Bon and others which permeated the rhetoric and ideology of Fascism. Given these and other back shadows to the recurrent staging of the individual against the crowd in *Bicycle Thieves*, it is all the more important to note the inadequacy, what is omitted in reading the film and the city it portrays exclusively through this binary pairing.

The film pitches itself ideologically and narratively in a dense terrain in between the monadic individual and the crowd; much of its richest descriptive work takes place within small groupings, clusters, constellations and communities of individuals, some stable and some improvised, each with their distinct internal dynamics, each with their sites and settings within the city, each part-public, part-private, and each with their particular social and narrative role in the world and in the fiction. If *Bicycle Thieves* can be said to create – woven into the melodrama of one man's struggle and humiliation – a world on screen that maps closely onto the social reality of Rome, 1948, then it does so largely through its mapping and moving within (again, that double perspective) the shifting urban communities of which Antonio is part of or into which he is dragged or stumbles.

In all societies, by far the most pervasive grouping that mediates between individual and society is the family. In modern Italy, perhaps even more than in comparable societies, the family has consistently been the defining, core unit of its values, politics, economics and social practices.[54] Even Italy's economic successes, whether in hard industry or in fashion, have been driven disproportionately by family-run companies, from Fiat to Olivetti, from Gucci to Versace. At the other end of the scale, Italy's industrialisation in the late 1950s was driven by the migration of poor southern workers to man the factories in the north, and also – as Visconti's magisterial family melodrama *Rocco e i suoi fratelli* (*Rocco and His Brothers*, 1960) showed – by the migration of those workers' families, leading to traumatic clashes of culture and values, to changes in the very idea that the nation had of itself (and of the family). *Bicycle Thieves* taps into a pre-history of those transformations and the 'familism' of Italian society in interesting and not necessarily obvious ways.

One family dominates *Bicycle Thieves*: the Riccis, Antonio, Maria, Bruno and an unnamed baby. Their names are archetypally commonplace and they look to us like the classic nuclear family. (Nichetti's *Icicle Thief* makes much parodic play of the contrast between the nuclear family of the 1940s and the TV-addicted,

dysfunctional nuclear family of the 1990s.) Their home apartment in the Val Melaina block (staircase H, apt. 1) is a little grim and tattered, without running water, but it is solid, not cramped and not dark, with a corridor and three rooms leading off it. There is the kernel of a decent home here, for family life as a small, self-sufficient, functional economic unit: their nameplate is even on the door and portraits of two grandparents hang soberly on the bedroom wall, looking across at a crucifix or two (see p. 58). All that is missing is a regular income for Antonio. Above, we saw how the first phase of the film's narrative builds an idyll of family contentment, as the problem of the bicycle is solved and Antonio and Maria look set to build a better future. Once again, the drama of Antonio's found-and-lost job is, then, a drama of transition: a man and his family moving towards, and then deprived of, a newly modern, rosy socio-economic future, as a working-class, perhaps soon lower middle-class, wage-earning family.

Part of this same picture of social change, however, is the loosening and weakening of wider social networks and the closing-in of the family on itself. The Riccis, after all, are relatively isolated (their neighbours outside the employment office, in the water queue, on the stairs, know who Antonio and Maria are, but there is little social interaction, just as their extended family is in evidence only in photos on the wall). There's not even a glimmer of a suggestion that family or neighbours will aid them in their moment of crisis: Antonio turns instead to a Party friend for help (but not to the Party *per se*, as perhaps Amidei had hoped). The weakening of support networks and the incipient atomisation of the family is perhaps further evidence of the consequence of Val Melaina's history, also: it is not just material infrastructure that is missing here, but social infrastructure too.

The Riccis are not the only family in *Bicycle Thieves*, however, nor is theirs the only family home or domestic space we see. Following a pattern we have come across again and again, a dominant, central feature is glossed and qualified, and inflected in mood also, by shards of comparable configurations encountered at the margins of the narrative and/or of the frame. There are at least

three other family units worth thinking about: La Santona's, the wealthy family in the restaurant, and the thief Alfredo's family. The latter two are explicitly staged as points of comparison with the Riccis, and the axis of comparison is essentially one of class.

The restaurant scene shows an uncomfortable encounter between a rich, bourgeois family at Sunday lunch – all dressed up for the occasion and enjoying plentiful food, obsequious service and the buzz of restaurant music and conversation – and part of a poor, working-class family struggling upwards on the social scale, but failing. The decision to enter the restaurant and to keep up, for one course at least, with the habits of the well-off, is a folly on Antonio's part, a gesture to win back Bruno's affection, a blowing of money he can no longer afford, a momentary fantasy about the life he might have led if he had his bicycle. It is a bourgeois dream of betterment, in other words, played out as a bitter comedy of the impossible. It is the same contrast between the wine drunk by Antonio to forget or by Bruno to play at being grown-up (the men together defying the

absent Maria), and the bottles thronging the table of the other family, an element of easy good living.

Alfredo's family contrasts with the Riccis in precisely the opposite direction. Here, the working-class Antonio rubs up against a semi-criminal underclass, a subproletariat operating in a world of theft and prostitution, outside the law and according to its own, closed-in systems for regulation and protection. (It is this urban, criminal underclass, thrust out onto the geographical margins of the *borgate* or *favelas* or equivalent that will occupy a string of urban realist film-makers influenced by neorealism, from Buñuel to Pasolini to Meirelles. Alfredo – so insubstantial and shadowy in *Bicycle Thieves* – has a long afterlife in film history.)

Many things, starting with a shared first initial and ending with a shared vocation for stealing bicycles, bind Antonio and Alfredo together, two poor, unemployed, working-class Romans struggling to make ends meet (Alfredo's mother laments, 'he's been looking for work for so long'). Alfredo is young, callow, but inured to petty theft and criminality; Antonio is older, with a young family, on the verge of a respectable future, but forced by circumstance to learn something that Alfredo learned as a young boy (how to steal; or rather, in Antonio's case, how not to steal). Their respective families and their family homes represent telling points of contact and contrast. Alfredo and his family are worse off than Antonio's; and it is there for Antonio and us to see, in Alfredo's epileptic fit, in the old-world poverty and cramped conditions of his family's one-room living space for four; in the face of the long-suffering, but defiant and dignified mother. (Just like the family in *Rocco and His Brothers*, this family is a matriarchy, the father missing, most likely having been killed in the war or having emigrated.) Anthropologically speaking, there is another, older shape to this home and family – extended (we hear about the wheel of a Fiat 1100 car belonging to the mother's brother-in-law), undivided into individual spaces (hence the mother's sarcastic injunction, 'Go on, look under the bed, see if there's a bike') – when compared to the Riccis' embryonic nuclear family in their spartan, clean-lined, but isolating

three-roomed home. The contrast between the old working-class communities hidden away in central Rome and the exposed, unfinished, Fascist-built *borgate* is replicated precisely in this contrast between family cultures and spaces. There are similarities, too, in the mothers or fathers with babies, men hanging about in the streets, people on errands, who populate the public spaces and the window frames and doorways of both Val Melaina and Vicolo della Campanella. But where there was no sign of community, let alone solidarity in the former, in the latter, when an outsider barges in threatening one of their own, an instant crowd gathers to defend Alfredo and to resist Antonio's accusations and even the carabiniere's attempts to resolve the situation. Local law trumps official law, here.

The coding of this solidarity is, of course, not simple: our sympathy and our spectatorial identification lies wholly with Antonio – we have followed him a long way by now – and the crowd's solidarity is, we know, the complicity of thieves (we see not only Alfredo, but also others from Via Crispi in the crowd here). The dark glasses and sharp suit of the local boss who emerges to oversee proceedings is sinister. So we are not looking at some idyll of old, working-class Rome and its decent, friendly communities. There is both a fierce ('amoral') familism and a Mafia-esque protection system at work. But when we look behind the crowd and the façade of street and communal life, into the domestic spaces of the poor who make it up, we and Antonio are – despite ourselves – forced to see the human and economic conditions, the cruel logic that cost him his bicycle.

The final family scene we encounter – and the only other family home we enter – is La Santona's, whose dubious trade as a clairvoyant is plied in a crowded bedroom bedecked with a mish-mash of popular Christian iconography and paraphernalia, her family assistants alongside her dealing with the queue and payment, or preparing tea and marshalling newcomers from the galley kitchen. This sisterly community is a matriarchy and this is significant in a film otherwise centrally focused on men and so-called men's problems only (work, fatherhood, providing for a family, growing into

manhood, weak masculinity etc.), starkly signalled by the early elimination of Maria as a protagonist. But La Santona's eccentric family unit nevertheless recalls something important about the Riccis' home. The latter too is peppered with icons and objects that mix religion and family, showing the persistence of old-world cultures of superstition and ritual (saints, but also a horseshoe hanging on the back of the front door) even in this modern setting, even in this (we surmise) Communist family. And the wide social spectrum of La Santona's clients – young and old, poorer and richer, the police marshal, and so on – tells us that certain rituals and beliefs, and social needs, cut across class divisions.

Promotional poster for *Bicycle Thieves*, 1948, by Ercole Brini

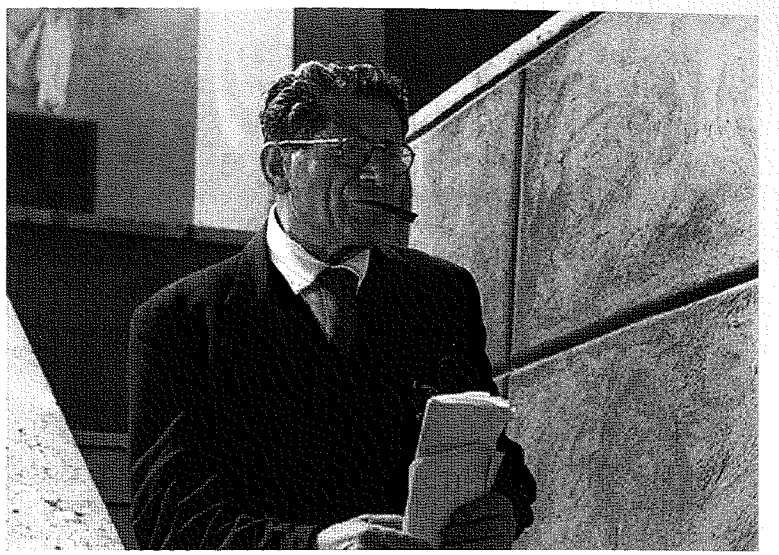
One final family image is worth mentioning as an aside: not, this time, from the film itself, but from publicity material that accompanied its release. At least one of the original promotional posters for the film gives an interestingly false image of the family and of the film as a family drama: it gathers into an inverted triangle shape the protagonists of the film, Antonio and Maria in happy pose on the bike at the bottom, and Bruno and the old tramp together at the top. The tramp occupies figurally the position of a grandfather in this family group portrait. Set against the reality of the tramp's role in the plot, this suggests that the film is also telling us a story about the absence of the extended family, of the wisdom of elders, in a world where men and boys are struggling and confused.

In talking about the family, we have already touched upon other loose communal groupings in *Bicycle Thieves*, such as the clients at La Santona's, the street life of Vicolo della Campanella (or other local areas in the city). These could be extended to take in the pseudo-family of the women at the brothel (another matriarchy) or clusters and gatherings such as the bus queues, or parts of the football crowd (from the radio audience to the Modena conscripts to the cluster of six smartly dressed young men who help run down Antonio). These communities are larger than the family, but not as vast or anonymous as to slip into the loose category of 'the crowd' or 'mass'.

There are also more organised and rooted communities at work, in particular associated with the two great, opposing socio-cultural forces of the day, the Church and the Communist Party. We see the former during the eight-minute sequence of the charity Mass; and the latter during the four-minute sequence in the workers' club in Val Melaina. In both sequences, Antonio is only incidentally looking for institutional or collective support; he is after particular individuals, one benign (Baiocco), the other hostile (the old tramp). Indeed, his arrival and anxious requests for help disrupt the communal activities carrying on in both places. The Party official or intellectual giving a speech under the arches of the PCI cellar shushes Antonio and, nearer to the entrance, the rehearsal of the music-hall

song on stage ('If She Really Loved Me . . .') is interrupted when Baiocco moves to talk to Antonio, leading to farcical exchanges between the players. In church, Antonio (and Bruno) meddle with the uptight rules and harmonies of the Mass at every stage of their pursuit of the old man. Antonio pesters him as he is shaved, threatens and talks away at him in the pews, despite calls for silence, and chases him round the aisles and courtyards, bursting in on the soup kitchen before it is ready, infuriating the charity volunteers.

This disruptive rhythm is all the more striking if we consider that the communal activities going on in the background gloss Antonio's predicament, flagging up underlying causes and possible consequences. The speech to the PCI group is all about unemployment and government hostility to unions and workers (the speaker refers to a public meeting earlier in the day, presumably the one policed by the riot squad we saw at the police station); and if the connection to Antonio's precarious position as one of the postwar unemployed were not clear enough, there in the cluster of Party men



listening to the speaker we spot, unmistakably, the cigar-puffing employment clerk who had given Antonio his job that morning. There is a transversal community here, both social and political: Baiocco's fellow players include Meniconi and Bagonghi, whom we will see the next day working the streets with him; and as Antonio sits on a bench to wait for Baiocco, another man pastes up a poster announcing the show and jokes to Antonio, 'I'm stealing your job!' In other words, he knows Antonio, he knows he has started a new job, he is perhaps one of the unemployed of Val Melaina who saw him getting assigned; although he does not, of course, know that Antonio has already all but lost the job, because of a real theft.

Beneath the anecdotal, individual surface of Antonio's story, then, lies a huge social and economic problem (unemployment) and a set of both deeply politicised and collective, communal responses to it. In the church, by contrast, the tramp and his hundreds of destitute fellow-congregants, dutifully sitting through Mass and some worthy preaching as the price for a wash, a shave and a meal, are an image of the poverty that awaits Antonio and his family if they fall even slightly further into trouble (if he is imprisoned for theft, for example). It is not only an image of poverty and dependency, but one of regimentation and separation (the men seem to be separated from the women in church) and of a strangely becalmed passivity. (The film got into some trouble from the Vatican newspaper *L'Osservatore romano* for its satirical and somewhat grim portrait of this charitable tradition.)[55] Both institutions are shown offering a mix of preaching and pleasure, indoctrinating but also building communal allegiances through bowls of warm soup or some singing and dancing. For Antonio, the mix is shown as a decidedly ineffectual response to his particular needs, to the circumstances of individual lives.

Both Church and Party also stand in interesting counterpoint to the communal gathering and rituals at La Santona's. In relation to the former, La Santona's religion is syncretic, superstitious, ritual and popular, a vibrant alternative to the official religion (a mother of a boy on crutches is told to 'tell [La Santona] all, like your confessor'),

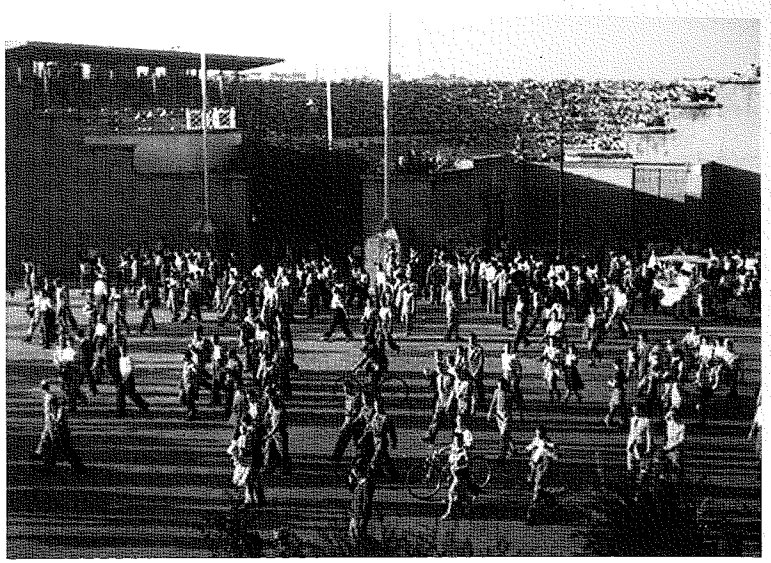
while Church charity is shown as regulated by the respectable middle classes along with the clerics. In relation to the Party, Maria's and Antonio's recourse to both Party and saints and miracles tells us something very important about how the ranks of the PCI, in a Catholic culture, commonly reconciled these two dogmas.[56]

After family, Church and Party, another layer of communal activity described in some detail in *Bicycle Thieves* is associated with the regular social practices of everyday life, in particular with work and leisure. Once again, we see the pattern of a singular central point and a teeming world of complementary activity all around it. Antonio's story is a story of one man and his job, a bill-poster plastering walls with film ads. Around and about his peregrinations, we see that and a great deal more of the world of work: we see women at their domestic labour, struggling at the water-pipe or at the stove (the thief's mother); we see prostitutes and clairvoyants (Maria, equivocating with Antonio, describes La Santona as 'a woman who works'). We see dozens of unemployed men, we see men working as street-sweepers and street-hosers, as market stall-holders, with their complex routines and rules and semi-illicit commerce; we see various kinds of policemen, some at their desks, or about to head off into conflict, or on the beat in the streets; we see a union man and his crew, collecting refuse, and public officials at Val Melaina, at the bill-sticking warehouse ('Centro Affissioni'), at the pawnbroker's; we catch a glimpse of someone manning a solitary petrol pump in the background at Via Pinciana and another where Bruno works at Piazza Sempione; of a bus conductor (in the crowd that catches Antonio at the end) or a bike-park attendant (in the same sequence, where two brief, identical sequences are spliced into the complex edit); we hear about manual labouring jobs (the job handed out after Antonio's is for a labourer at nearby Tufello); and we see the edges of the black, criminal economy, from thieves to the local crime boss to the network of murky contacts and sales around which stolen goods circulate. Finally, in one of the film's several nods backwards in time, showing Rome as a place of urchin labour (as in *Shoeshine*), where

schooling is nowhere in sight, we see children working and playing and inhabiting the streets as much as the adults. Bruno, for one, works at Piazza Sempione (he can write and do arithmetic, though, suggesting he is or has been in school), earning the family's only wage to speak of until now; and beggar children wander the street, playing the accordion, half innocently, half menacingly, pestering Antonio and his workmate and then an elderly passer-by, asking for money.

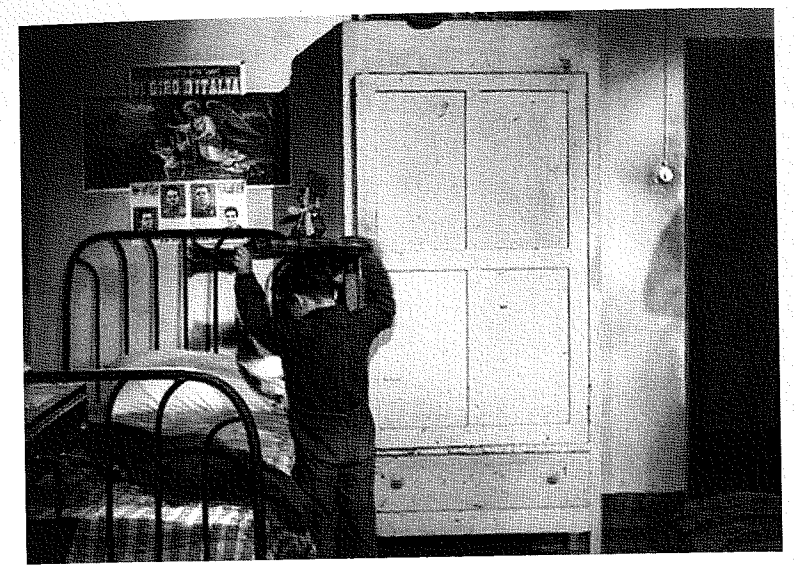
Several of these work activities are in full swing on Sunday, the so-called 'day of rest': the ladies of the brothel are resting for lunch, but only for lunch; La Santona is hard at work on both Friday and Sunday; Baiocco and his crew are set up for work on Sunday at dawn and the markets are as busy as any other day. The buses and trams are working, so are the police, restaurateurs, the well-to-do charity volunteers and the clergy. In other words, for whole swathes of (mostly working-class) Rome, Sunday is not a leisure day at all, but another day of labour. (Conversely, for the unemployed, even working days are days of waiting and inactivity.) Nevertheless, there is also a detailed portrait of a Rome at leisure and play on show in *Bicycle Thieves*, an anthropological interest in the dimension of *otium* to complement the bustling *negotium* of the city and its economy at work.

Visions of leisure time in *Bicycle Thieves* centre on sport, (hints of) sex, eating, music and cinema. The great closing sequence is staged against the backdrop of the Sunday 'Serie A' football match between Roma and Modena[57] with tens of thousands of (working-class, male) fans cheering and then pouring out into the square. The Sunday sporting cyclists who flash by in front of Antonio and Bruno are a glimpse of the other great mass-participation sport in mid-twentieth-century Italy. Back in the Ricci apartment, up on the wall of the bedroom, is a poster for the Spring 1948 Giro d'Italia race (p. 96), won not by one of the two iconic heroes of Italian cycling of this era, Gino Bartali or Fausto Coppi, who had turned cycling into an almost mythical national narrative over the ten years of their fluctuating sporting (and even political) rivalry, but by Fiorenzo



Magni. There is something of an echo of this heroic vision of cycling in Bruno's loving care for his father's bicycle when it first returns from the pawnbroker's. With both cycling and football, then, the Ricci men show hints of the shared fantasies of millions of Italians, although held at a distance: there's no money for seeing the match or cycling for pleasure.

The ghost of unavailable pleasure is also there when three men – Alfredo, Antonio and, nearly, Bruno – burst into the brothel. We know what men are normally doing in a brothel, but not here: the bicycle is all that matters (*Bicycle Thieves* always holds sexuality at bay or in displaced corners, as with the quirky episode of Bruno being pestered by a paedophile at Piazza Vittorio). In passing through this place, though, the film is surely nodding to another place of luxury for a man with time and money to spare. Similarly, the restaurant – where Antonio and Bruno look decidedly out of place – shows us another way of spending leisure time and money for sensual pleasure and excess. The musical accompaniment to the scene – a



carefully staged interweaving of the drama of class, with the trio in the background playing up to it – contains another hint at problems of sex, family and poverty, here filtered through race: 'Tammurriata nera', written in 1945, is about a Neapolitan woman astonished to give birth to a black baby, having slept with an American soldier.[58] Even the famous scene of Antonio pasting up the split sheets of a buxom Rita Hayworth – her sensuality on concerted display in the low-angle shot – represents, among other things in what is a complex play of metacinematic nods and allusions, his exclusion from the glamour and pleasures of this mass form of escape and desire.[59] The discrepancy between cinema, modern leisure, perhaps especially Hollywood, and ordinary lives (suggesting a perhaps disingenuous dream of a new cinema for the masses) is underlined by a disgruntled Meniconi as he drives Antonio and Bruno towards Porta Portese and the rain starts to fall: 'It always rains on Sunday. You finish at one and you have to stay shut up indoors . . . I can't stand what's on at the cinema ['*sto cinematografo*], I really can't stand it.'

Meniconi wants to be able to go out, to laze around and indulge in real rest, not to stay shut up indoors, at home or at the cinema. In among all the allusions to modern pleasures is also a vision of wholesome, open-air, popular leisure, of more innocent, perhaps even folkloric pastimes. There's the boys' game of *piastrelle*, the stone-throwing game outside La Santona's, staged and choreographed very carefully to connote innocent play but also a possible looming threat of theft at the same time. In an interesting moment of shared popular culture, Antonio instantly joins in the game – again, a form of old communal bonding – telling the boys whose stone is in the winning position (p. 98); and this contact is enough to convince him to trust the boys to look after the bike as he goes upstairs to retrieve Maria. Both songs in the film – at the *casa del popolo* and at the restaurant – are popular or music-hall and quite traditional in feel, although both are also lively and a little risqué and sexual in subject matter. Maria, in a brief sideways shot, is shown dreamily drawn to what's going on on stage, a moment's relief from the disaster that has just struck her

family. Finally, the scene at the River Tiber where boys mess around in the water, one of them nearly drowning, quite apart from its brief impact on Antonio's own drama of guilt, seems like another scene of innocent, sun-drenched play in a film laden with the heavy weight of life's responsibilities and risks.

The spectrum of communities in *Bicycle Thieves* is what gives the film its remarkable sociological density. It builds a teeming world of activity and movement in a *tour de force* of filmic bricolage. The very richness and complexity of the world is also, however, a source of deep disorientation for Antonio, evidence of the immense difficulty of living in this changing society in which networks of relations are unstable and directions unsure, of navigating not only the city but also the spaces, rituals and practices that tie it to its people and to their lives.

7 'I Cried, and I'm a Man'

It may seem odd that we have not yet focused directly on the heart of *Bicycle Thieves*, on its emotional hook. What audiences found (and find) so compelling about the film were its powerfully moving life stories, its protagonists' psychologies, feelings, motivations. Research into audience-response data from a UK Mass-Observation survey in 1950 confirms this. Respondents were asked if they ever cried at the cinema and the two films 'which commanded by far the strongest responses' (particularly among middle-class viewers) were *Brief Encounter* (David Lean, 1945) and *Bicycle Thieves*.[60]

From its first release, then, *Bicycle Thieves* cut across boundaries of nationality and of genre, not for its experimental, documentarist purity, but because it was a 'weepie' (although not, as was conventionally the case with such films, about love nor primarily about or aimed at women). This has caused the film no little trouble: it has been damned by the faint praise of many who cannot quite countenance its reliance on mawkish sentimentality.[61] For them, the emotion in *Bicycle Thieves* is manipulative and facile, in flat contradiction with both the ideological and aesthetic ambitions of neorealism. A wide-eyed, plucky youngster trails around his brow-beaten father, melting the hearts of even the stoniest of viewers; but our tears – teased out by Cicognini's schmaltzy, plangent score and by De Sica's all-too-expert management of his actors – do little to analyse the material conditions of labour, to effect social reform or to salvage the dignity of a man. The narrative is unresolved and essentially circular, with no sense of future (compare, say, the utopian moment in *Rome Open City*, when two key characters sit on the stairs and dream of the better Italy that they are fighting for).[62] A distinct, but related line of response to the film is pitched at the level of character analysis, loading onto the hapless Antonio an array of

character flaws that are shown as the root cause of his travails (thereby, again, attenuating the film's wider critical capacity). Thus, Antonio is passive, submissive to authority, indecisive, sometimes infantile and confused; he fails to follow through, to impose his will (even to get on a tram, let alone to pin the theft on Alfredo), and, on occasion, lashes out violently, only then to feel guilty; he is neglectful of both Maria and Bruno, caught up in himself, inept; and so on. This portrait is only enhanced when set alongside comparable character sketches of both Maria and Bruno. Maria is physically and psychologically strong, practical and forcefully resentful of her destiny (and perhaps of her husband), able to make Antonio happy and to make him do what she wants. Antonio fears her 'whining' [*lagne*] and Baiocco condescends to her ('You're like a little girl'), but Antonio is closer to being right at La Santona's when he calls her a woman 'with two children and her head screwed on right': she has more than a touch of the strong-willed, typically Roman, working-class woman embodied by Anna Magnani in films from *Rome Open City* to Pasolini's *Mamma Roma* (1962). Bruno, meanwhile, is a child–adult, maturely looking after the bike and his sister, berating his father for missing a dent on the bike and for letting the old man slip away, standing tall in his own workplace, unfazed by the paedophile at the market, dusting himself down when he falls, waiting responsibly while Antonio is off searching, holding back from a wasteful meal when Antonio starts talking about money, quick-witted enough to jump the queue at La Santona's (unlike Antonio in the tram queue) and to get help from the police twice over when Antonio is heading for trouble. Of course, Bruno is also still very much a child – peeing in the street, sulking when punished, excited by the idea of a pizza – and his performance of his adult roles in childish imitation of his father, his enforced maturity is all the more poignant for it.

In the face of this, perhaps we should go looking to defend poor Antonio: he is, at least, dogged in his searching, he pushes on and on, for his family as much as for himself; despite all the rebuffs, he comes

up with several different resources and strategies to carry on; he is restrained and retains his dignity until the very end; he is proud of his family; he has the human empathy and intelligence to see why the search is over; and so on. But, while there is undoubtedly a complex portrait of Antonio in *Bicycle Thieves*, it may also be that a debate over character (is it his fault? is character destiny?) misses the point of the film. Like much realist storytelling (and indeed like the epic quest stories of which *Bicycle Thieves* is a reprise), psychology, character, interiority are not really the prime means the film deploys either for its storytelling or for its sociological mapping or even for its unashamedly moving evocation of lived experience.

Indeed, critical unease with the sentimentality of *Bicycle Thieves* has itself begun to look rather facile, both because our criteria for reading neorealism are no longer as constrained as they once were by dogmatic critical categories and resistances; and because a long wave of film theory and analysis of Hollywood and other kinds of melodrama – a genre built in excess, tears, emotional breaking-points, and coded into film language in many and complex ways – has shown us how the affective dimension of narrative and of the viewing experience is a rich potential tool for probing a given world, its social tensions and contradictions.[63] Haughty dismissals of weepies no longer automatically hold water.

The melodrama and high emotion of the film are meshed in, through all the complex layerings, patterning and bricolage that we have seen, to the form of the film and the shape of the world it is chronicling. Antonio's human drama, and the long peregrinations around his sense of self and of self-worth, match (and are directly, physiologically as it were, produced by) his peregrinations around Rome. A path leads from his and our motion (around the city) to emotion (the tears that accompany the stumbling gripping of hands between father and son, the audiences' tears; p. 102) and the path travelled makes for an intense engagement with the problems of Italy, 1948, as well as with existential problems of solitude, of self and world.

We can look at four examples of channels of emotion in *Bicycle Thieves* that eschew interiority as their primary resource: the formal configuration of characters; the plastic play of physiognomy and the movement of people and objects in space; the schematics of music and light; and the hidden intimations of mortality that haunt the film.

There is a decidedly formalist bent to the presentation of character in this film, which uses relational and geometrical vocabularies rather than one of depth-psychology. The singularity at the centre of the film is, of course, overwhelmingly, Antonio. As the credits fade, his surname is the first word uttered, and within twenty-five seconds the camera finds him (p. 103): from then on, he is always to the fore, either visible on screen, looking or looked at, or vividly present out of frame. All the teeming, rooted world described by *Bicycle Thieves* comes at us, remarkably, as brief fragments of what Antonio catches sight of or is brusquely brought up against. We only move off our constant scrutiny of his face or his body in sequences of seconds at most (the longest is the full minute during

which we and he follow La Santona's humiliation of the mustachioed man; but we have seen how even this acts as a correlative for Antonio's predicament). This represents quite an extraordinary level of concentration, of obsessive centring, and it is partly through the sheer length of time we contemplate this one man, his face and his place in the world, that we feel his plight so keenly. This concentration also fixes the higher drama in the film as a universal struggle between two forces: the individual and his will versus the obstacles and forces of the phenomenal world.

Other people, other characters stretch the singularity into two dimensions by functioning either as refractions of Antonio's struggle or as messengers from that opposing force, from the world. Thus, the call of the employment official that opens the film all but summons Ricci to life to play out his story before us, like some classical deity. Maria and Bruno, too, are best seen as functional pairings for Antonio – the figure of the individual in the world – rather than as psychologically rounded portraits of a wife or a son. To underscore

this, we can go back to the game of splitting the film up by days: for most of Friday, Antonio is paired with Maria (Bruno does not appear); for Saturday and Sunday, he is with Bruno (Maria does not appear again, nor does she ever appear on screen with Bruno, throwing the overwhelming emphasis of the film onto the sphere of masculinity, onto the father–son couple). Antonio and Bruno are dawn and dusk companions only on Saturday, although Antonio is only rarely alone in between (a crucial exception is the moment of the theft). On Sunday, they are almost never apart (except for short moments at the Ponte Duca D'Aosta, at the brothel; or at the stadium when Bruno tries to catch a tram). Psychologically speaking, we might read this as a further sign of weakness of character, of dependency or immaturity on Antonio's part; but it also suggests that these other characters function as lenses through which to view the individual, as refractions of the centre.

This is clearest in the case of Bruno. Antonio and Bruno are less father and son – certainly, despite their brief spat, there is little or nothing of the Oedipal struggle about them – than they are two archetypal aspects – experience and innocence – of the individual's struggle in the world. They are (to use a Beckettian term) a pseudo-couple,[64] each defined, worked out and propelled through the narrative by the other. Bruno is a narrative device, although one of substance and resonance, much like the bicycle. He is a moral device, a perspective whose presence, as Millicent Marcus has argued, opens up the possibility of our moral engagement with the film.[65] He is also the means to our emotional response to Antonio's predicament, the picture of what is lost in Antonio, in the individual, when the world grinds him down to abjection. The line in film history that precedes *Bicycle Thieves* and on which it draws heavily – from Chaplin's *The Kid* to Vidor's *The Crowd* (and one might also mention Vidor's *The Champ*, 1931) – was well versed in this dynamic interweaving of a father–son coupling with an emotional rush. In a technical sense, too, Bruno's presence provides a point of view, a different focaliser that constantly and in a series of different ways 'triangulates' and multiplies

the visual and hermeneutic perspectives on what we see. Christopher Wagstaff has analysed with great acuity the formal features of the restaurant scene, for example, to show the shifting points of view, between Bruno and Antonio, interacting with each other, the band, the waiter, the other family and the larger restaurant interior.[66]

Other characters and other momentary pairings or groupings similarly open up spaces for response and understanding, for both emotional and intellectual engagement; and the set of such moments presents us with a spectrum of possible responses, ranging from indifference to hostility to empathy. Thus, the companion who shows Antonio how to paste up his posters has some resonant words of advice, ostensibly about pasting and brushing, but clearly about much more than that too: 'You see Ricci, to do this job you need to be very smart: you need to keep your wits about you and work fast.' The same can be said for Baiocco's lesson about how Piazza Vittorio works. Even the glamorous image of Rita Hayworth seems to strike a pose towards the world, of defiant sexual confidence, of fantasy and desire, that contrasts with Antonio's put-upon mien. Most eloquent and paradigmatic of all, perhaps – because it stages what should be our own, ideal, humanely intelligent response to the film – is the triangulation of looks between Antonio, the

bike-owner and Bruno at the end, where a banal crime transforms before our eyes, in the look of the owner, into what we know it is, an act of desperation, born of circumstance, worthy of compassion.

All these pairings, with the pseudo-couple of Antonio and Bruno at their head, speak to us also through their physiognomy, and through their physical position in and movement through space. One of the best-known anecdotes about the film concerns De Sica's choice of actors, about how he instinctively cast by physical presence, by faces, bodies, gait, gestures. And the film, in its typically hybrid fashion, chops and changes its framing and shots to focus now on this or that part of Antonio's body or persona, on his clothes, on his movement through this or that location or environment. In particular, Antonio and Bruno frequently move together in tandem, in rhythm running with or against each other, as strikingly described by Vernon Young:

> In *Bicycle Thieves*, De Sica developed the film's rhythm by a *pas de deux* of man and boy in their scouting expedition through the city, the boy nervously anxious to keep in time with his father's mood and intention The adjustments of temper and of tempo, the resolution, the haste, anger and embarrassment, the flanking movements, the frustrations and periodic losses of direction: these constituted a form of situational ballet which gave the film its lyricism [67]

What Young calls lyricism is what we are calling emotion and it is a product not of psychological motivation or action, but of a play of movement, that 'situational ballet'. In a 1950 essay in *Sight and Sound*, Karel Reisz was subtly alert to how the play of movement and editing played such a crucial role in explaining the impact of *Bicycle Thieves*. Discussing the sequence after Antonio has slapped Bruno following their exit from church, he noted:

> [ ] we are, it is true, immediately shown a close shot of the boy bursting into tears A lesser director may have left it at that Here, however, we are given a deeper insight into the boy's reaction: in the next shot, the boy is seen

> walking sulkily – almost proudly – in a wide arc away from his father The close shot is simply used to make us think that the boy is still by his father's side, but the point is made in the long shot which follows – by the way the two actors are disposed in the frame It comes as a sudden revelation: we now see that the boy is indeed hurt by his father's momentary cruelty, but we feel that his pain is tinged with a certain wisdom and understanding, expressed in the illogical, poignant manner of a child
>
> This passage constitutes an almost exact antithesis of normal editing procedure [68]

Reisz's note shows how the formal manipulation of film language can create mood, but also something more substantial than this, something like the moral and psychological drama of the scene itself, triggering both the emotional content of the narrative and the emotional response of the spectator. Following this line of analysis further, there is also a great deal of comparable work done in *Bicycle Thieves* by light and music (and diegetic sound). While the effects of

Cicognini's score are rarely subtle – it modulates between the dominant minor melody first heard over the credits (in a style that was followed and imitated by his great successors, Nino Rota and Ennio Morricone), signalling poignant suffering and loss and most often associated with Antonio, and several lighter motifs, signalling either comic diversion or (as Antonio enters the city) a major-key triumph – there is nevertheless careful and more subtle interplay between music and silence or music and diegetic sound, confirming yet again the hybrid style of the film. For example, the first twenty minutes of the film, leading up to the theft, introduce us to the variety of motifs and moods that will overlay the whole film, for long periods in muted background notes (e.g. in Via della Paglia), integrated with diegetic sound (or apparent diegetic sound) such as chatter or ambient noise. Only twice is there no music at all to allow for some establishing dialogue. There is then, suddenly, an extraordinary leap into (what feels like) documentarist, unaccompanied street noise, with no dialogue to fill the gap, as soon as a dissolve takes us from Via Pinciana (with its jokey accordion music) to Via Crispi and the scene of the theft. The whole tenor and mood of the film changes here as it plunges into 'reality', aurally speaking, marking the shift from the apparently trivial, at times comic, at times slightly melancholic narrative thus far, into the film's highest synthesis of realism and melodrama. When the minor melody re-emerges from the pure street noise, just as Antonio's anguished face re-emerges into the light from the Traforo tunnel, its valency and power to move us – and the film as a whole – have stepped up to a new level.

The play of light and dark, sun and shadow (as in the tunnel sequence) is similar if not more elaborate than the use of music in *Bicycle Thieves*, marking shifts of mood and emotion but also more keenly opening up the moral dimensions of the drama as well.[69] The stills on pp. 109–10 show just two instances of scenes permeated by a vocabulary of light that gives mood and value to the narrative content, the first constraining Antonio and Bruno to a narrow, impossible strip of light as a line of escape, a signal of their vanishing

possible paths and choices; and the second staging the great moral dilemma of the film's climax – to steal or not to steal – in the relentless sunlight split by the sharp lines of the lamp-post and its shadow (echoed by the lines and shadows of the building behind). Seconds later, Antonio will cross the dark threshold.

One final dimension of the film responsible for determining emotion and mood, in a way that precedes or transcends channels of character identification or interiority, is worth mentioning. An often unstated or submerged pall of mortality hangs over the film and darkens the mood of all the other effects we encounter. This is an elusive element, since it is deliberately not a film that uses death to ratchet up its impact – unlike, say, *Shoeshine*. Nevertheless, death hovers around it. In Zavattini's film diary, over the same period of the gestation of *Bicycle Thieves*, we find him obsessed with a news story, and a screenplay he planned to write on it, of a soldier returned from the war, worn down by the same conditions faced by Antonio, who had publicly threatened to commit suicide. In one version of the

Bicycle Thieves screenplay, at the climax, Antonio sees a woman who has thrown herself from a window and suicide strikes him as his only solution.[70] In the film, we have already noted how the irony of the bicycle's apparently triviality is played off against its 'life-and-death' significance for Antonio. And death-toned moments pepper the film, in events and turns of phrase: La Santona's clients come in mourning or with sick relatives to receive some balm; Alfredo collapses in a (more or less genuine) epileptic fit not long after Antonio has threatened 'I'll kill you' and one of the bystanders remarks 'He's more dead than alive'; Antonio's first comment on his frustrations at not having a bike to take up the job offer is 'It makes you feel like throwing yourself in the river', and, two days later, he witnesses a boy nearly drowning in the Tiber. The significance of all these – the link between the struggle of the individual in the world (and its particular inflexions in Italy, 1948) and the struggle between life and death – is perhaps best captured in a mere echo of dialogue: Maria looks to solve Antonio's problem, declaring 'There must be a solution'; whereas later, at the restaurant, Antonio corrects or qualifies Maria's proverbial optimism, evoking the shadow hanging over all his struggles, when he tells Bruno 'there's a solution to everything . . . except death'. Ultimately, even the core formal and metaphorical play between motion and stasis in the film – Antonio's stalled life versus his neurotic attempts to solve this by constantly moving around the city – needs, perhaps, to be re-read as a play between life and death.

Holding off talking about the emotional impact of *Bicycle Thieves* and the human drama of its characters and their experiences has allowed us to see that emotion and drama immanent in the effects of film language and in all the material presences and patterns we have looked at. Six years after *Bicycle Thieves*, Federico Fellini made a film also set in a world of poverty, also centred on a strangely eloquent and resonant symbol (here, the chain of a strong-man circus act) and also built around a man driven, after much wandering, to a tearful and intensely moving cry of despair. *La strada* (1954) – another

arthouse weepie – shares with *Bicycle Thieves* the capacity to get under our emotional skins not through depth-psychology, but through the symmetries and patterning of fable-like storytelling. What *Bicycle Thieves* adds on top of this – indeed, concealing its narrative-emotional trickery almost entirely – is that layer of thick description of its world that *La strada* (quite deliberately) omits. In this way, De Sica and Zavattini make possible a complex interpretation and a felt understanding of the world of Italy in 1948, an understanding of the inherently impossible position individuals are in, caught between irreconcilable contradictions, both in that world and perhaps in the world *tout court*.

* * *

Despite Zavattini's frustrations with his working partnership with De Sica, which boiled over as the director of *Bicycle Thieves* was lauded across the globe, the pair went on to work together on twenty more films, including two further major entries in the neorealist canon: the magical fable of Milan's dispossessed *Miracolo a Milano* (*Miracle in Milan*, 1950) and the study of poverty in old age that was perhaps their purist 'realist' effort, *Umberto D.* (1952). De Sica moved on to a series of important and successful films, including (as director) *La ciociara* (*Two Women*, 1960), *Ieri, oggi, domani* (*Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow*, 1961), *Matrimonio all'italiana* (*Marriage Italian Style*, 1964) and *Il giardino dei Finzi-Contini* (*The Garden of the Finzi-Contini*, 1970); and (as actor) the *Pane, amore e . . .* series (*Bread, Love and . . .*, Luigi Comencini, 1953–5), *Peccato che sia una canaglia* (*Too Bad She's Bad*, Alessandro Blasetti, 1954), *Il generale della Rovere* (Roberto Rossellini, 1959) and dozens more. Several of the crew of *Bicycle Thieves*, such as Montuori and Cicognini, worked on these also. Zavattini went on to write for around seventy more films and continued as an irrepressible cultural activist, producing documentaries, making influential visits to Cuba and Mexico, working in television and publishing, writing plays and poetry, painting and drawing.

The fate of the actors, especially that of Lamberto Maggiorani, was less happy but perhaps more in keeping with the sense of *Bicycle Thieves* that I have outlined here. Maggiorani had promised De Sica he would return to the Breda arms factory after his foray into cinema and, with 200,000 lire ($1000) in his pocket, he dutifully did so in 1949. Within months, however, he was made redundant in a general restructuring. That he was among those laid off was in part because his employers assumed that he had made money from playing Antonio. He took on work as a bricklayer, but looked also for more opportunities in cinema, including pleading with De Sica, who reluctantly used him as an extra. De Sica also worked with him on a strange six-minute short made in 1950 for a 'cine-magazine' project, in which he, Maggiorani, Staiola and Montuori reconstructed a fake on-set 'shooting of' documentary of three scenes in *Bicycle Thieves*. Maggiorani picked up some work behind the scenes at Cinecittà and some minor acting roles. Pasolini, always with a keen eye for old icons and archetypes, cast him in a bit part in *Mamma Roma*. It was a rather sorry story and Zavattini wasn't the only one to see parallels between Maggiorani's wanderings in search of work and Antonio's in *Bicycle Thieves*.[71] Zavattini even drafted a treatment for a screenplay about him in 1952, to be called *Tu, Maggiorani* (*You, Maggiorani*). In it, the fates of Antonio and Maggiorani run parallel, the worlds of *Gilda* and *Bicycle Thieves* merge, and with them comes a muted, corrective sense – Zavattini's sense – of the limits of cinema (neorealism and all cinema) and its capacity to change the world:

Maggiorani wanders off around the city, just as he did in the film when he was searching for his bicycle. He walks and walks in the fog. He doesn't even know where he is going. He's tired and lost. He'd like to take some sweets home to his son but he has no money. He passes by a cinema where they are showing *Bicycle Thieves*. An elegantly dressed lady comes out, wiping away a tear. He decides to go in. The usher won't let him in, even

when he says is the star of the film, but in the end he lets him through. Maggiorani sees the film and is touched himself. As he comes out with all the others, no-one notices him. People leave the cinema, turn up their coat collars and head off to their warm homes, the film they have just been watching already quite forgotten.[72]

Notes

1 For box-office figures, see Roberto Poppi, *Dizionario del cinema italiano I film*, Vol. 2 (Rome: Gremese, 2007), p. 234. Fifty-four Italian films were released in 1948, but so also were 410 foreign films, taking 86.7 per cent of the box office (Callisto Cosulich (ed.), *Storia del cinema italiano*, Vol. 7, *1945/48* (Venice: Marsilo, 2003), p. 608)

2 See André Bazin, 'Bicycle Thief' (1949), and 'De Sica: metteur en scène' (1953), in André Bazin, *What Is Cinema?*, Vols 1–2 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), pp. 47–78

3 Anon., 'Curzon Cinema. Bicycle Thieves', *The Times*, 22 December 1949

4 Bosley Crowther, 'Vittorio De Sica's *The Bicycle Thief*, a Drama of Post-War Rome, Arrives at World', *New York Times*, 13 December 1949

5 Leonard J. Leff and Jerold L. Simmons, 'No Trollops, No Tomcats', *American Film* vol. 15 no. 3 (December 1989): 40–3, 53–4 (40)

6 See the excellent recent reappraisal in Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, *Making Waves: New Wave, Neorealism, and the New Cinemas of the 1960s* (London: Continuum, 2007)

7 Godfrey Cheshire, 'A Passionate Commitment to the Real', booklet accompanying DVD edition of *Bicycle Thieves* (Criterion, 2007), p. 7.

8 J. Hoberman, 'Wheels of History', *Village Voice*, 30 September–6 October 1998

9 There is a handful of datable cultural icons on view, including the poster in the Riccis' apartment of the 31st Giro d'Italia bicycle race (May–June 1948); or the publicity poster of Rita Hayworth for *Gilda* (Charles Vidor, 1946; Italian release, 1948)

10 The best general history of the period in English is Paul Ginsborg, *A History of Contemporary Italy* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990), pp. 8–120

11 B. R. Mitchell, *European Historical Statistics 1750–1975* (London: Macmillan, 1981).

12 Italo Calvino's 1964 'Preface' to his 1947 début novel, *The Path to the Spiders' Nests* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1998), pp. 10–11

13 Luchino Visconti, 'Il cinema antropomorfico', *Cinema* no. 8, 25 September–25 October 1943: 173–4; in English, in David Overbey (ed.), *Springtime in Italy. A Reader on Neo-Realism* (London: Talisman, 1978), pp. 83–5

14 The most influential 'ideological' defence of the film was that of socialist intellectual Franco Fortini, 'Ladri di biciclette', *Avanti!*, 30 January 1949, who argued that the power of the film derived from its potential for both Communist and Catholic readings of Antonio's predicament

15 This account of the production of the film draws on a wide range of sources. For economy of space, not all are cited; but see collations in Franca Faldini and Goffredo Fofi (eds), *L'avventurosa storia del cinema italiano raccontata dai suoi protagonisti: 1935–1969*, Vol. 1 (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1979), pp. 133–7; and Paolo Nuzzi and Ottavio Iemma (eds), *De Sica e Zavattini Parliamo tanto di noi* (Rome: Riuniti, 1997), pp. 93–141

16 Cesare Zavattini, 'Some Ideas on the Cinema', *Sight and Sound* vol 23 no 2, October–December 1953: 64–9.
17 See Carlo Celli, 'The Legacy of Mario Camerini in Vittorio De Sica's *The Bicycle Thief* (1948)', *Cinema Journal* vol 40 no 4 (Summer 2001): 3–17.
18 Bazin, 'Bicycle Thief', p 51.
19 'Diario cinematografico', in Cesare Zavattini, *Opere: Cinema* (Milan: Bompiani, 2002), pp 70–83 and 90.
20 I am grateful to one of the BFI's anonymous readers for this suggestion.
21 Estimates vary between 60 and 100 million lire.
22 The 293-page annotated typescript of the screenplay is held in the Zavattini archive, Biblioteca Panizzi, Reggio Emilia (R 38), henceforth SC.
23 Vernon Jarratt, 'Masterpieces Aren't Made for £9,000', typescript held in BFI Library, London, pp 1–3 (2).
24 Fabio Rossi, *Il linguaggio cinematografico* (Rome: Aracne, 2006), p 100. Another source suggests Aldo Fabrizi dubbed Baiocco, the refuse collector played by Gino Saltamerenda, <www genux com/bio asp?ID_CAST=331&TIPO=1> (accessed 24 January 2008). Scenes with Baiocco at Piazza Vittorio are particularly poorly synchronised.
25 Nicola Chiaromonte, 'Rome Letter', *Partisan Review* vol 16 no 6 (June 1949): 621–30 (622).
26 Bazin, *What Is Cinema?*, pp 50, 68. A precisely contemporary, if absolutely not realist work, Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1953, but written 1948–9), was famously described in comparable terms, by Vivian Mercier, as a play in which 'nothing happens, twice'. There is more than one point of connection between Beckettian themes and *Bicycle Thieves*.
27 Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997; first English edn 1960), pp 71–5.
28 Giame Alonge, *Vittorio De Sica: Ladri di biciclette* (Turin: Linadau, 1997), pp 39–40. The same scene comments further on the meandering flow of the film: when the policeman tells Antonio to look for his own bike, he replies, incredulously, 'What am I supposed to do – wander around Rome?'.
29 The analogy between Italy and China inspired Wang Xiaoshang's *Beijing Bicycle* (2001).
30 See Ginsborg, *History*, on this transition, the so-called 'economic miracle'. The Italian scooter would be transformed into a global cultural icon by Audrey Hepburn and Gregory Peck in *Roman Holiday* (William Wyler, 1953).
31 On the sociology of the bicycle and links to *Bicycle Thieves*, see David Forgacs and Stephen Gundle, *Cultura di massa e società italiana 1936–1954* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2007), pp 36–40.
32 There have been formalist analyses of the film before: see especially Kristin Thompson, 'Realism in the Cinema: Bicycle Thieves', in *Breaking the Glass Armor: Neoformalist Film Analysis* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), pp 197–217; and Christopher Wagstaff, *Italian Neorealism: An Aesthetic Approach* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2007), published as this book was going to press.
33 *Waiting for Godot* riffed comically on the two thieves in the Gospels; and Pasolini's 1963 film-within-a-film *La ricotta* centred on one of the thieves (or, rather, a poor, Roman actor playing him in a film).
34 Alonge, *Vittorio De Sica*, pp 57–85.
35 Michelangelo Antonioni would take this to a new extreme with his famous 'empty' closing sequence in *L'eclisse* (*Eclipse*, 1962).
36 This slapstick moment is one of the few elements not present in Zavattini's screenplay, suggesting that the invention was De Sica's. On comedy in the film, see Christopher Wagstaff, 'Comic Positions', *Sight and Sound* vol 2 no 7 (1 November 1992): 25–7.
37 The screenplay has Bruno finally getting to have his pee later, outside La Santona's (SC, p 210).
38 In the screenplay, this slot was filled with a mournful visit of a woman whose mother is dying (SC, pp 220–4), once again suggesting that De Sica wanted to lighten the tone.
39 Pierre Sorlin, *European Cinemas, European Societies 1939–1990* (London: Routledge, 1991), p 121.
40 The screenplay has an even more elaborate sequence for this journey, in which, among other things, Antonio clings onto the back of a bus on his bike and is dragged along (SC, pp 57–63).
41 The variety of these figures is clearer in Italian, where each has a different title (*carabiniere, brigadiere, maresciallo, poliziotto, commissario*). In a further scene in the screenplay only, Antonio and Maria swerve on the bike to avoid being seen by a traffic policeman (*vigile*) (SC, pp 33–4).
42 Posters on show include *L'aquila* (*The Eagle*, a 1925 Rudolph Valentino vehicle); *Torbide acque* (*The Night Has Eyes*, Leslie Arliss 1942); *Il corvo* (*Le Corbeau*, Henri-Georges Clouzot, 1943); *Lo sterminatore* (*Dillinger*, Max Nosseck 1945); *Gioia di vivere* (*Forever Yours*, William Nigh, 1945); *L'ultimo orrizonte* (*Gallant Journey*, William Wellman, 1946); *I conquistatori* (*Canyon Passage*, Jacques Tourneur, 1946). It is almost an anthology of the popular, foreign cinema of the day.
43 See Giuliana Bruno, *Atlas of Emotion* (London: Verso, 2002), pp 174–7 on city views and cinema.
44 See Zavattini, 'Some Ideas' and other essays.
45 Franco Moretti, *The Atlas of the European Novel, 1800–1900* (London: Verso, 1998).
46 The river scenes include not only the Tiber but also its Aniene tributary running near Val Melaina, like a boundary line separating it from greater Rome.
47 The screenplay locates the police station at Piazza S Luigi dei Francesi, near A on the map (SC, p 80).
48 This is also the historic location of Rome's local daily newspaper, *Il Messaggero*.
49 Simon Inglis, *The Football Grounds of Europe* (London: Willow, 1990), pp 50–3.
50 On Val Melaina and the *borgate*, see Italo Insolera, *Roma moderna* (Turin: Einaudi, 1971), pp 136–51; and in

relation to cinema, John David Rhodes, *Stupendous, Miserable City Pasolini's Rome* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), pp 1–16; and Mark Shiel, *Italian Neorealism Rebuilding the Cinematic City* (London: Wallflower, 2006), pp 70–3 (and cf pp 54–62 on *Bicycle Thieves*)

51 Alessandro Portelli, *L'ordine è già stato eseguito Roma, le Fosse Ardeatine, la memoria* (Rome: Donzelli, 1999), p 87

52 Bazin called the film the 'story of a walk through Rome' ('Bicycle Thief', p 55); and cf Bruno, *Atlas of Emotion*, p 30

53 There are extensive links between the two films, starting with the gesture of a son taking his father's hand at a moment of (in Vidor's case) suicidal crisis, calqued at the climax of *Bicycle Thieves*

54 Paul Ginsborg, *Italy and Its Discontents Family, Civil Society, State* (London: Palgrave, 2003)

55 Another gentle dig at the Church is the cameo of the chattering Germans at Porta Portese, in their Propaganda Fide robes (a precursor of the mix of tourism, kitsch and Church in *La dolce vita*)

56 The saint-like cult surrounding Stalin among Communists was nicely captured in Leonardo Sciascia's short story 'The Death of Stalin' (in *Sicilian Uncles* (London: Granta, 2001), pp 53–84)

57 There was no Rome–Modena match during the shooting period of *Bicycle Thieves* The pairing was perhaps inserted into the narrative by Zavattini, who grew up in Emilia-Romagna not far from Modena

58 See Nelson Moe, 'Napoli '44 / "Tammurriata Nera" / *Ladri di biciclette*', at: <www premionapoli it/2007/tamm html> (accessed 26 January 2008)

59 In Zavattini's original treatment, Antonio was posting up an army call-up notice, underscoring the legacy of war rather than the glamour of Hollywood ('Diario', p 78)

60 Sue Harper and Vincent Porter, 'Moved to Tears: Weeping in the Cinema in Postwar Britain', *Screen* vol 37 no 2 (Summer 1996): 152–73 (167) Similarly, in an audience questionnaire of 1949 reported by *L'Unità*, one respondent noted 'By the way, I cried; and I'm a man' (' "Senza pistole abbiamo fatto centro" ', *L'Unità*, 5 February 1949)

61 Zavattini himself worried about De Sica's sentimental tendencies, reminding him how he had 'fought doggedly to keep the film the right side of De Amicis [author of a famous, but highly sentimental nineteenth-century children's novel, *Cuore* (*Heart*), a film of which De Sica was acting in during 1947–8]' (Cesare Zavattini, *Uomo, vieni fuori!: soggetti per il cinema editi e inediti*, ed Orio Caldiron (Rome: Bulzoni, 2006), p 104).

62 I am exaggerating slightly, but not much: cf Eric Rhode, 'Why Neorealism Failed', *Sight and Sound* vol 30 no 1 (December 1960): 26–32 (28–30); or Andrew Sarris's comment that '[ ] lacking an insight into the real world, De Sica relied on tricks of pathos' (Andrew Sarris, 'Auteur Theory and the Perils of Pauline', *Film Quarterly* vol 16 no 4 (Summer 1963): 26–33 (31)); or the political critique in Frank Tomasulo, 'Bicycle Thieves: A Re-Reading' (1982), now in Howard Curle and Stephen Snyder (eds) *Vittorio De Sica: Contemporary Perspectives* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), pp 160–71

63 See, e g , *The Cinema Book*, ed Pam Cook and Mieke Bernink, 2nd edn (London: BFI, 1999), pp 157–71 There's an interesting discussion of emotion in neorealism in Patrick Keating, 'The Fictional Worlds Of Neorealism', *Criticism* vol 43 no 1 (Winter 2003): 11–30

64 Beckett used the term in *The Unnameable* (1953) to evoke his earlier characters Mercier and Camier

65 Millicent Marcus, *Italian Film in the Light of Neorealism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), pp 54–74

66 Wagstaff, 'Comic Positions'.

67 Vernon Young, '*Umberto D*: Vittorio De Sica's "Super"-Naturalism' (1956), now in Curle and Snyder, pp 198–203 (200)

68 Karel Reisz, 'Editing', *Sight and Sound* vol 19 no 2 (April 1950): 79 Reisz was in the process of preparing his influential book *The Technique of Film Editing* (London: Focal Press, 1953), although these comments on *Bicycle Thieves* did not make it into the book

69 Alonge, *Vittorio De Sica*, pp 52–4

70 Zavattini, 'Diario', pp 66–70; Michele Gandin, 'La bicicletta è una cosa importante', *Il progresso d'Italia*, 6 May 1948 And cf note 53 above

71 See, e g , 'The Stolen Bicycle', *Time*, 16 January 1950

72 Archivio Zavattini, NR130 (later in Zavattini, *Uomo, vieni fuori!*)

Credits

Ladri di biciclette
Italy 1948

Director
Vittorio De Sica
Screenplay
Oreste Biancoli
Suso D'Amico
Vittorio De Sica
Adolfo Franci
Gherardo Gherardi
Gerardo Guerrieri
Cesare Zavattini
Story
Cesare Zavattini
From the novel of the same name by Luigi Bartolini
Director of Photography
Carlo Montuori
Film Editor
Eraldo Da Roma
Art Director
Antonio Traverso
Music
Alessandro Cicognini

Production Company
a P.D.S. (Produzioni De Sica S. A.) film

Production Manager
Umberto Scarpelli
Unit Manager
Nino Misiano
Production Secretary
Roberto Moretti
Assistant Directors
Gerardo Guerrieri
Luisa Alessandri

Camera Operator
Mario Montuori
Orchestra Conductor
Willy Ferrero
Film Stock
Gevaert 'Pancro 47'
Negatives/Prints
Tecnostampa di V Genesi
Sound
Gino Fiorelli

uncredited
Producers
Sergio Bernardi
Cesare Cicogna
Ercole Graziadei
Screenplay
Sergio Amidei
Production Assistant
Sergio Leone
Songs
Mario-Nicolardi
Pisano-Cioffi
Sound
Bruno Brunacci

CAST*
Lamberto Maggiorani
Antonio Ricci, the father
Enzo Staiola
Bruno Ricci, the son
Lianella Carell
Maria Ricci, the mother
Elena Altieri
lady at charity mass
Gino Saltamerenda
Baiocco, Antonio's friend
Giulio Chiari
the old beggar
Vittorio Antonucci
Alfredo Catelli, bicycle thief
Michele Sakara
secretary of charity mass
Fausto Guerzoni
amateur actor at workers' club
Carlo Jachino

uncredited
Ida Bracci Dorati
'La Santona', the fortune teller
Giulio Battiferri
Alfredo's helper
Massimo Randisi
wealthy boy in restaurant
Peppino Spadaro
officer at police station
Mario Meniconi
Meniconi, a dustman
Checco Rissone
policeman in Piazza Vittorio
Sergio Leone
seminarist sheltering from the rain
Memmo Carotenuto
man watching argument in street
Nando Bruno
Giovanni Corporale
Eolo Capritti
Emma Druetti
Umberto Spadaro
Spoletini

* most roles were played by unknowns or bit-part actors, not credited to specific roles; as a result, several cast credits given here are of uncertain accuracy

Production Details
Filmed May to October 1948 on location in Rome and at S.A.F.A. (Palatino) Studios

Release Details
Italian theatrical release by ENIC – Ente Nazionale Industrie Cinematografiche Première 21 November 1948 at Cinema Barberini, Rome
Running time: 93 minutes/length: 2561 metres

US theatrical release (as 'The Bicycle Thief') by Arthur Mayer & Joseph Burstyn on 12 December 1949 in New York City.
Running time: 90 minutes. Certificate U.

Italian State Film Register (Pubblico registro cinematografico) n. 725

Bibliography

Two full *découpages* of *Bicycle Thieves* have been published: i. 'Le Voleur de bicyclette de Vittorio De Sica', in *L'Avant-scène du cinéma* no. 430 (March 1994): pp. 10–75 [dialogue in French and Italian]; ii. Orio Caldiron and Manuel De Sica (eds), Ladri di biciclette *di Vittorio De Sica. Interventi, testimonianze, sopralluoghi* (Rome: Pantheon/Associazione Amici di Vittorio De Sica, 1997), pp. 64–111. The script was published in English in 1968 (but in a version translated from a French edition): Vittorio De Sica, *Bicycle Thieves*, trans. Simon Hartog (London: Lorrimer, 1968). The source novel was translated into English as Luigi Bartolini, *Bicycle Thieves*, trans. C. J. Richards (London: Michael Joseph, 1952).

The best DVD version of *Bicycle Thieves* now available is the Criterion Collection set (2007) (Region 1 – NTSC), including a restored transfer and a great deal of very good supplementary material, in a print booklet and on disk. There are Region 0 versions by Arrow Films (2006) and Image Entertainment (1998). For a comparison, see: <www.dvdbeaver.com/film/Reviews/bicycle_thief.htm> (accessed 26 January 2008).

Bicycle Thieves is well known enough always to be mentioned in works of film history, discussed in a few paragraphs often, but relatively rarely analysed in sustained detail. Some exceptions are cited in the notes (Alonge, Bazin, Celli, Marcus, Shiel, Tomasulo, Thompson, Wagstaff); and others I have found useful include: P. Adams Sitney, *Vital Crises in Italian Cinema* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), pp. 88–97; Henri Agel, *Vittorio De Sica* (Paris: Éditions universitaires, 1955), pp. 71–100; Roy Armes, *Patterns of Realism* (London: Tantivy, 1971), pp. 149–55; Orio Caldiron, 'La modernità di un classico', in Ladri di biciclette *di Vittorio De Sica*, pp. 28–33; Vincent Rocchio, *Cinema of Anxiety: A Psychoanalysis of Italian Neorealism* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999), pp. 53–78; Mark West, 'Holding Hands with a Bicycle Thief', in Howard Curle and Stephen Snyder (eds), *Vittorio De Sica: Contemporary Perspectives* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), pp. 137–60.

For sources on De Sica, see Bert Cardullo, *Vittorio De Sica: Director, Actor, Screenwriter* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2002) and John Darretta, *Vittorio De Sica: A Guide to References and Resources* (Boston, MA: G. K. Hall, 1983); and, for a good critical anthology in English, Curle and Snyder, *Vittorio De Sica*.

Zavattini is not well served in English. In Italian, however, there is a mass of material available: Bompiani has published a series of collated volumes of his literary and film works, essays and letters (Cesare Zavattini, *Opere*, Vols 1–3 (Milan: Bompiani, 1991–2005)); and there is a collection of his screen treatments, Cesare Zavattini, *Uomo, vieni fuori!: soggetti per il cinema editi e inediti*, ed. Orio Caldiron (Rome: Bulzoni, 2006). The best place to start is the excellent and growing resources on the Archivio Zavattini website: <www.cesarezavattini.it/>.

For a lively record of the partnership between De Sica and Zavattini, using original quotations, interviews and documents, see Paolo Nuzzi and Ottavio Iemma (eds), *De Sica e Zavattini. Parliamo tanto di noi* (Rome: Riuniti, 1997).